

# Thai Puppet Performance: New Idioms and Reinterpreting Traditions



*Mural painting (at Temple of the Reclining Buddha, Bangkok) depicting traditional Hun performance*

Puppet performance used to be among the most popular forms of entertainment in the central part of Thailand. However, with the introduction of new forms of entertainment and the changing Thai society, its popularity declined. There has been interest in traditional puppet theatre and new performance idioms in recent years. In this article, **Jirayudh Sinthupahan** discusses contemporary tradition-based practices of puppet theatre and the efforts of practitioners to preserve and develop the performance form.

**P**uppet theatre once held a very special place in Thai culture. A puppet performance was not merely theatrical entertainment; it also formed a part of ritual and folklore that were once embedded in the Thai way of

life. Since the changes in Thai political order in the 1930s, the popularity decreased, and the art form almost disappeared from public consciousness. It was only recently that a new surge of interest in this traditional theatrical form began to emerge.

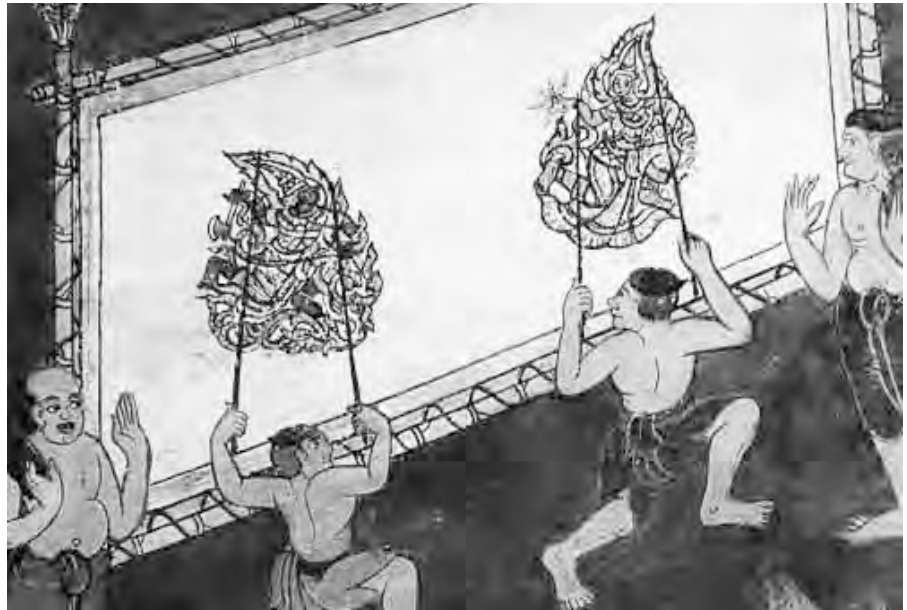
## Traditional Puppet Theatre and Tradition-based Practices

Generally, there are two forms of traditional Thai puppet theatre – *nang* or shadow puppet and *hun* or doll puppet. *Nang* is considered to be the oldest form of Thai theatre. The word *nang* literally means ‘skin’ or ‘hide’. As a theatrical form, it denotes a puppet performance that employs a set of two-dimensional hide-figures in its enactment of dramatic stories. *Hun* can be translated as ‘body’, ‘model’ or ‘sculpture’, and therefore refers to puppet performance with the use of three-dimensional figures. These two puppet forms can also be classified further into several sub-forms, in terms of differences in technical and performance conventions as shown in the following table.

Forms and sub-forms of Thai puppet theatre

<i>Nang</i> – Shadow puppet	<i>Hun</i> – Figure puppet
<i>Nang Yai</i> - large shadow puppet performed in front of the screen in Central Thailand	<i>Hun Luang</i> - large figure puppet of the royal court
<i>Nang Talung</i> - small shadow puppet performance of Southern parts of Thailand	<i>Hun Lek</i> - miniature-sized figure puppet of the royal court
<i>Nang Pramotai</i> - small shadow puppet performance of the northeastern part of Thailand	<i>Hun Krabok</i> - small to medium-sized puppet of popular entertainment
	<i>Hun Lakorn Lek</i> - <i>bunraku</i> type puppet of popular entertainment

Traditionally, the arts and crafts of puppet theatre were transmitted within a family of puppeteers with few changes over the generations. Thus, the term ‘traditional puppet theatre’ will be used here to refer to the puppeteer practice associated with this form of training. On the other



*Mural painting (at Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok)  
depicting traditional Nang Yai performance*

hand, the term ‘tradition-based puppet theatre’ will be used specifically to refer to the practice of puppeteers who came from social and educational backgrounds different to traditional puppeteers’. This article focusses on contemporary tradition-based practices of *nang yai* and *hun* performance.

## **Nang Yai in the Changing Thai Socio-cultural Context**

*Nang Yai*, or simply *nang*, were popular when the city of Ayudhya was the royal seat of a newly founded kingdom of the same name in the fourteenth century. It is believed that *nang yai* was a form of visual communication to promulgate the idea of the demigod monarch among its ethnically diverse population. As a result, *nang yai* is considered to be a ritualistic performance rather than a form of entertainment. All of its existing repertoires are strictly derived from the Ramayana epic. Although two new plays based on Buddhist themes were commissioned in the mid seventeenth century, there has been no evidence that they have ever been performed.

The production of *nang yai* is a colossal and costly venture. A normal sized puppet is about 2 metres in height, and weighs around 5 kilogrammes. Each one takes 3 to 4 months to make. There is no record of the cost

of a puppet in the past (today, a simple puppet may cost around 600 US dollars). For each episode of the Ramayana that lasted between two and three hours, 150 or more puppets were normally required. Additionally, the staging of a performance also used to involve compulsory military recruitment and a large work force connected to royal patronage. With the introduction of Western-style military training in late nineteenth century and the dissolution of absolute monarchy in 1931, it is not a surprise that *nang yai* lost its significance and popularity in Thai society. After many decades of the puppets being left to decay in storage, a group of aging puppeteers from Wat Khanon temple began reviving the *nang yai* performance in the early 1980s. Now, there are three *nang yai* troupes actively performing across the central plain region. They are Wat Khanon temple troupe in Ratchaburi province, Wat Bann Don temple troupe in Rayong province, and Wat Sawang-arom temple troupe in Singhaburi province.

One of the major challenges of restoring *nang yai* to its proper glorious state is clearly the issue of work force. It is not easy to recruit and train new generations of puppeteers in a modern Thailand. In traditional Thai society, Buddhist temples were the centre of education and the community. Since the secularization of the Thai education system in the late nineteenth century, this responsibility has been transferred to the Ministry of Education, whose mission is to raise the nation's literacy level and to prepare the labour force for its economic production. Although many schools are still located within the monastery compound, the temple has lost its intellectual along with administrative influence over the school. Of the three monasteries, only Wat Khanon has a school attached to it, and all of its performers are students attending the school. Wat Baan Don and Wat Sawang-arom have no school attached to the temple. Hence, their performers are students from other schools in the area. The temple, therefore, need to convince the schools and parents that *nang yai* training will not interfere with, but will complement their education. In place of compulsory recruitment, the students are persuaded to voluntarily join the troupes at the age of 7 or 8. They will attend daily training session in the evening, and during the weekend as a part of their extracurricular activities. Most performers remain with the troupes until they leave schools at 17 or 19 years old. Only a few of them have been able to stay on to continue training and performing. Accordingly, the troupes'



*A scene from Nang Yai performance at Wat Khanon, Ratchaburi*

inclination to develop fully trained performers and a new creation of full-scale repertoire remains quite a challenge.

Another challenge for the troupes is adapting the *nang yai* performance to the changing aesthetic sensibility of the modern audience. Due to its rigid performance structure and conventions, *nang yai* has never been an inherently enjoyable spectacle (Eiwsriwong 1995). With the emphasis on the beauty of court-style poetry along with *nhaa phat* (a set of musical modes and tightly choreographed movements for specific moods and character types), *nang yai* was congenial to aristocrats who were trained to appreciate such refinements. The commoner, on the other hand, would probably enjoy *nang yai* for its spectacular staging and battle-like procession; but as P. Posakrishna (cited in Nawigamune 2003) wrote in 1990, the *nang yai* performance was generally “too slow and too repetitive. The audience will be fascinated at first, but will gradually find the performance couldn’t keep up with their own pace.”

With regard to performance structure, the three *nang yai* troupes drastically cut the full-length performance (that usually lasted all night) to between one and three hours. However, they still retain some of the rigid conventions; for example, the lengthy “*berk nhaa pra*” (the invocation of deities) and “*chab ling huakam*” (catching monkeys at dusk) that mark the beginning of the performance, and the rule that requires the story to reach its conclusion. In other areas of performance, each temple has adopted its own approaches to entertaining audiences, which resulted in the creation of distinctive performance styles. Wat Khanon troupe has gone for a more conservative approach, and sought collaboration with educational and art institutions in conducting a number of experiments and research projects to reinstate the authenticity of the art. As a result, Wat Khanon has been able to reproduce *nang* puppets with old construction techniques and to re-imagine *nang yai* performance in an archaic style. Wat Khanon’s performance style is considered more vigorous and masculine than those of the other two troupes, and is delivered by male performers playing female roles. Wat Khanon has not trained any female performers or let them touch the puppets. This is due to the belief that *nang yai* is of Hindu origin, and that the puppets are inscribed with male sacred power. In this matter, Wat Sawang-arom holds a similar approach to Wat Khanon’s even though the troupe is generally



*A scene from Nang Yai at Wat Baan Don, Rayong*



more open towards experimentation. Wat Baan Don, on the other hand, possesses a different attitude towards the issue, and has trained female performers for some years. The temple has also collaborated with contemporary theatre practitioners such as Patravadi Meejudhon who brought in contemporary staging techniques and the use of the method in *khon* dance drama training to train the puppeteers.



*Modern staging of Nang Yai by the Wat Baan Don troupe*

The most difficult challenge to the *nang yai* troupes is probably the issue concerning performance outlet and patronage. Traditionally, *nang yai* would be engaged as a part of important festivities and funerals sponsored by the state or a wealthy person; and it would be staged free of charge in an open public space such as temple grounds. Nowadays, the troupes get less of this form of engagement as *nang yai* began to lose its meaning in Thai society, and its traditional patronage system gradually disappeared. Accordingly, the troupes have had to find new performance outlets and new form of patronage in different contexts. One form of patronage comes through the Tourism Authority of Thailand, who often engages the troupes to perform during state occasions and to represent the country at numerous international events. Another form of patronage comes as occasional financial grants from the local government or charitable foun-

dations. The funds were used by the troupes to set up a museum and a small permanent theatre. Every Saturday, the troupes will put on a special performance that includes demonstrations and lectures for students and tourists. Increasingly, donations from these visitors become essential to the livelihood of the troupes and the museum.

## **Diverse Practices of Contemporary *Hun* Performance**

In contrast to the ritualistic nature of *nang yai*, *hun* (figure puppet) has always been a more popular form of entertainment. With its less strict performance conventions, this puppet form has always been open to new elements and changes. Throughout its history, diverse forms of *hun* have constantly been conceived and reinvented. Yet, there has been very little material evidence of these diverse practices left to us. This is probably due to the belief that a puppet carries a trace of its owner's soul as well as having its own soul. In the past, it was customary for the puppet to be cremated after the death of the puppeteer. Although some puppets have survived in temple and museum collections, puppeteers do not know how to operate and perform with them.

## **Hun Luang and Hun Krabok**

The courtly puppet form of *hun luang* is a classic example of such a case. A set of *hun luang* puppets has been in the collection of Bangkok National Museum since it was opened; and yet little is known about how they were used in performance. The first record of this puppet form can be found in a seventeenth-century Buddhist cannon, *Pra Nemiraja*, where it is mentioned alongside *khon* dance drama and Javanese *topeng* as a part of royal festivity. *Hun luang* is a large-sized marionette type puppet of 1 metre in height. It is carved out of wood and dressed up in the manner of a *khon* dancer. In contrast to Western-style marionette, its complicated mechanical strings are hidden inside the body to be manipulated from underneath. It is believed that *hun luang* used the same script and performance convention as *nang yai* and *khon*. *Hun luang* was at its height during the early nineteenth century. It became extinct after the suspension of the Royal Performing Arts Department in 1926. Since then, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to revive *hun luang*.



*Hun krabok* is a much simpler form of puppet than *hun luang*, with similar mechanism to the Western-rod puppet. At the height of its popularity in the late nineteenth century, there were at least 10 puppet troupes in the Bangkok area alone. Its repertoire came mostly from folktales and folk literature. Only a few troupes under aristocratic patronage performed stories from the Ramayana or Javanese *Panji* cycle. The popularity of this art form declined after the Thai government introduced the cultural policy of 1942, prohibiting public exhibition of non-Thai cultural activities. This affected *hun krabok*, which had been thought of, quite mistakenly, as having foreign origins. However, it gained another surge of popularity during the 1950s when Mr. Piak Prasertkul's troupe held a regular show on television. It was this television show that drew Chakrabhand Posayakrit to the world of *hun krabok*, and inspired his lifelong quest to reinvent and elevate the art form. Following in Chakrabhand Posayakrit's footsteps, younger generations of puppeteers have been shaping contemporary *hun krabok*. At one end of the spectrum, there are practitioners who are developing their practices within the framework of conventional forms. At the other end, there are those who have chosen to adapt elements from other cultures, and integrate new idioms and techniques with what they have drawn from traditional Thai forms.

## **Chakrabhand Posayakrit**

The works of Chakrabhand Posayakrit fall into the first category. Chakrabhand is a graduate of the Thai Arts Department at the privileged Silapakorn University. He is a skilled and innovative artist who excels in a variety of artistic activities. These artworks are universally admired, and he is considered to have brought glamour to the world of tradition-based art. Chakrabhand worked with *hun krabok* in the early 1970s under the guidance of Mr. Piak's daughter, Mrs. Cheun Sakunkeo. Gradually, he designed and constructed his own puppets. Chakrabhand's puppets are very delicate and exceptionally beautiful. Extremely refined and technically complex, his style of performance reflects the influence of court theatre on his aesthetic ideals and artistic execution.

Chakrabhand works with a close-knit group of assistants, many of whom have been with him from the beginning. Although there is no shortage of

people who want to join this elite group of practitioners, the lack of work force is still evident due to the scale of his works. For Chakrabhand, *hun krabok* is a labour of love, and bears him no personal monetary gain. As a result, Chakrabhand overlooks the needs of the audience/consumers, and instead focuses on perfecting his production. He pushes the art of *hun krabok* to its limit, technically and aesthetically. His performance has been praised for the refinement of puppet animation and exciting repertoires. Besides traditional *hun krabok* repertoire such as Ramayana and *Pra Apaimanee*, Chakrabhand also looked for material from other sources. For instance, he staged a production of *Sam Kok* based on the Chinese ‘Romance of Three Kingdoms’ in 1992. His current project is *Taleng Pai*, a historical play based on the actual event of the sixteenth century Siamese-Burmese war.

## Somporn Kaetkaew

Another contemporary practitioner belonging to the first category is Somporn Kaetkaew. Somporn is one of the country’s most accomplished traditional fiddle makers. His Siamese fiddles or *sor* are very much in



*Somporn Kaetkaew and his young students at the Weekend Market in train station, Amphawa*



*Somporn Kaetkaew talks to students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok*

demand and could fetch exceptionally high prices. Somporn originally came from a family of farmers. After completing his compulsory education, he went to the Mae Klong region in the west of Bangkok to learn the craft of *sor* making. The Mae Klong region is regarded as the cradle of central Siamese arts; and is home to many accomplished musicians and performers, including *hun krabok* puppeteers. *Hun krabok* of the Mae Klong region is different from those of other regions in its vivacious and inventive choreography. Somporn studied and performed under the direction of two of Mae Klong's famous puppeteers: Wongse Ruamsook and Chit Rodphai.

After the death of Wongse, Somporn decided to run his own troupe, and invited former members of Wongse's troupe to perform with him. This venture, however, did not last long. In the early days of his development as an artist, Somporn looked up to Chakrabhand Posayakrit as a career model. Nonetheless, he gradually developed a distinctive style of performance to suit his own aesthetic ideals and cultural context. While Chakrabhand draws his inspiration from court art, Somporn based his creation on folk arts and crafts. After he saw that a *hun krabok* puppet is usually expensive, he had the idea of creating *hun krabok* from everyday materials, such as coconut shells. He also draws inspirations from television soap opera and the popular music scene, to expand the repertoire and make puppet theatre more accessible to the mass audience.

The issue of work force is also a major challenge to the development of puppet theatre in Somporn's view. Apart from the recruitment of puppeteers, it is equally difficult to find a group of traditional musicians who are both responsible and talented. There were many occasions when he found his musicians too busy for a rehearsal or too drunk to perform. Accordingly, Somporn developed a form of solo puppet performance to be accompanied by recorded music. He began to perform in unusual settings, e.g. on the platform of a provincial train station or in a local marketplace during the weekend. He also had an open-air theatre built for him in the middle of his orchard. This is an outlet for occasional performances for devoted audiences.

## Vilawan Svetsreni and the Hobby Hut Puppet Theatre

The work of Vilawan Svetsreni and the Hobby Hut took a different direction from that of the puppeteers previously mentioned. Although their form of *hun krabok* appears Thai, its origin is strictly a cross-cultural one. Vilawan is a drama graduate from Thammasart University (Bangkok), who had a chance to study *hun krabok* with Cheun Sakunkaew at the university's Drama Department. After spending some years at the University of London, Vilawan came home to lecture at the School of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University (CMU). Her starting point was an art project on puppet theatre that she and her students decided to work on. The classroom project developed into a permanent puppet troupe. At one time, the troupe was supported by Chiang Mai University's arts centre. Later, Vilawan independently ran the troupe herself under the name of 'Hobby Hut Puppet Theatre'. Most of her troupe members are the graduates who attended her class. Vilawan and her students experimented with the idea of borrowing some constructing techniques from Sundanese *wayang golek*. Thus, Hobby Hut's *hun krabok* has a full realistic body instead of the baggy costume of the traditional puppet. What has made her performance interesting is the way she brings together the art forms, whose origins are from the central plain, and the distinct Lanna culture.

Historically, the north of Thailand (known as Lanna in the past), has gone through a different historical and socio-cultural transformation to that of the Central Plains. Similar to other ethnic or regional cultures, the culture of Lanna was regarded as inferior to that of the Bangkok court. Only for the past 10 to 15 years has Lanna culture begun to get a new breath of life with the Hobby Hut puppet theatre being a part of the Lanna cultural resurgence movement. Vilawan and her colleagues researched traditional Lanna arts, which became the basis of their creations. Most of their repertoire is based on northern folktales and literature. The troupe performs in the Lanna dialect, and innovatively employs northern style music to accompany the performance. During their period at CMU Arts Centre, their audience mostly came from intellectual and expatriate communities. Vilawan and the Hobby Hut Theater have also been invited to perform around the country and abroad. After they moved out of the CMU Arts Centre, a permanent outlet for their performance became an

issue. As a result, they have adopted the management style of a mobile theatre to perform upon request.

## **Hun Chang Fon**

Another puppet troupe from Chiang Mai is Hun Chang Fon. The troupe is a creation of the husband and wife pair, Pasakorn and Saphawee Sunthornmongkol. Pasakorn, who is a graduate of Silapakorn University, is responsible for the design and construction of the puppets; while Saphawee, a native of Lanna, is responsible for the choreography and puppet animation. Their inspirations came from *hun luang* and Lanna arts. Similar to Vilawan's puppetry, their form of puppet theatre is an innovation with noticeable traditional Lanna flavours, in terms of the style of the performance and repertoire. The pair began performing as amateur street performers at various open-air events in Chiang Mai; and they still continue to do so even after winning a prize at Prague's World Puppet Festival in 2009.

## **Hun Lakorn Lek**

Another form of contemporary Thai puppet theatre is *hun lakorn lek*, a type of puppet constructed and animated in the same manner as the Japanese *bunraku* puppet. The period of its popularity lasted from around 1914-1920 until the outbreak of the Second World War. According to Chakrabhand Posayakrit (1984 pp 76), *hun lakorn lek* became less popular due to the difficulty of puppet manipulation and its slow performance pace. Just before his death, Master Krae, a master of *hun lakorn lek*, dumped almost all of his puppets into a river to prevent other people from copying his craft. In the 1980s, a former member of Master Krae troupe named Sakorn Yang-keawsot, or Joe Louise, began to reconstruct *hun lakorn lek* puppet just for his own amusement. His work caught the attention of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), which took *hun lakorn lek* on their tourism exhibitions across the globe.

Mr. Sakorn was a *khon* mask maker by profession. After the initial recognition by TAT, he started to train the members of his family to perform *hun lakorn lek* under the name Joe Louis Theater. The troupe

performed as a traveling company for many years before deciding to have a permanent theatre built for them on the family ground outside Bangkok. The theatre was destroyed in a fire, but with some financial aides they were able to rent an old gymnasium at Suan Lum Night Bazaar in central Bangkok to establish a new theatre. Joe Louis' Natayasala Theatre became the only permanent puppet performing facility in the country at the heart of Bangkok's commercial area. In the early 2004, the theatre was threatened with closing down due to the high management cost. A grant from Princess Galyani Vadhna of the Thai royal family helped until a new development plan for Suan Lum Night Bazaar forced the theatre to officially close in 2010.

Of all the puppet theatre troupes, Joe Louis Theater is probably the only one that earns a living from its performance. It is hence important for them to embrace the audience, most of whom were tourists. The troupe's main selling points are their unique performance conventions and the exoticism of Thai-ness. During their run at Natayasala Theatre, their performance normally lasted about two hours, and composed of a documentary about *hun lakorn lek*, a choreographed performance showing how the puppet is manipulated, and a scheduled play. The performance would be followed by an episode from the Ramayana presenting the monkey Hanuman attempting to capture the ogress Benyakaya. To these days, this is still an act that they often perform since it allows the two characters to interact with the audience and to receive gratuitous tips from them.

Without a permanent theatre, the troupe has had no space for their full-scale performance. Their attention has been directed towards developing short performances for commercial promotional events and for international festivals. After Natayasala Theatre at Suan Lum Night Bazaar, there have been several attempts by the troupe to set up a dining theatre, first in Pattaya and now in Bangkok, as an outlet for performance and as an additional source.

After the closure of the Natayasala Theatre, former members of the Joe Louis Natayasala have been involved in several *hun lakorn lek* projects, one of which is the founding of Aksra Hoon Lakorn Lek Theater, a new business venture of the King Power Group that is better known as an operator of duty free shopping malls in Thailand. The Aksra Theatre was established



in the group's flagship store in central Bangkok to provide an extravagant experience of Thai culture for visitors to the country. The one-hour performance composes mainly of different forms of Thai dance re-enacted by *hun lakorn lek* puppets, as well as their interpretations of international performing arts, particularly Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Dance.

Another newcomer to the world of *hun lakorn lek* is Kum-nai Thai Puppet. The young troupe was founded by a group of graduates from Silpakorn University (Bangkok), with an ambition to develop their own performance style and aesthetics. The troupe works and performs at the Artist's House, a non-profit artist commune outside Bangkok. With a permanent performance outlet, they can direct their goal towards achieving artistic and technical brilliance. Kum-nai Thai Puppetry style of performance is understated when compared with that of the other two *hun lakorn lek* troupes. They perform in the open air without sets, which allows them to focus on achieving precise puppet animation. The troupe offers a daily performance, and provides a workshop in puppet animation for visitors free of charge. The eventual goal of the members is to establish a training centre for the art of puppetry.

## Conclusion

At one end of the spectrum, practitioners with a background in traditional Thai arts (i.e., Charkrabhand Posayakrit, Somporn Kaetkaew, and the members of Joe Louis Theatre) have chosen to develop their practices within the framework of conventional forms such as *hun krabok* and *hun lakorn lek*. At the other end, practitioners coming from other educational backgrounds have chosen to look into other cultures, and incorporate new idioms and techniques into the elements that they have drawn from traditional Thai forms.

From a few examples of practice described in this article, one can observe a series of recurring challenges to the existence and the development of contemporary Thai tradition-based puppet theatre. The first and the most difficult challenge is the provision of working and performance spaces for puppet theatre, fully or partially subsidized by the state or a charitable organisation. Such support will provide the practitioners with a

freedom to solely invest their energy and time in artistic pursuits. With a permanent performance space for puppet theatre, it will also allow puppet companies to develop more complex full-scale productions; as well as give the audience the opportunity to regularly attend puppet performances.

After researching contemporary practices in Thai tradition-based puppet theatre, and conducting interviews with puppetry artists, the author has identified the socio-cultural challenges to the development of the art form, and feels that it may be an appropriate time now for Thailand to establish a training centre or a study programme devoted to the art of puppet theatre. This will help solve the problem of the lack of skilled work force in the field. As we have seen, there has never been a shortage of people who wish to enter the world of Thai puppet theatre. Each person comes with original ideas and the intention to bring puppet theatre through the time of socio-cultural changes. Formal as well as informal pedagogic institutions would be equally beneficial to the education of the audience about the development of puppeteers. The socio-historical background of the art form and the challenging issues that practitioners encounter in the contemporary Thai socio-economic climate must be understood. Aesthetic and practical concepts employed by contemporary practitioners in their search for new performance idioms should be appreciated too. Above all, the training centre and study programmes could also act as a platform where practitioners can interact and consider the future of contemporary Thai puppet theatre together.

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