

# Likay Goes to Japan

## *Folk Theatre of Thailand*

Likay is a form of popular folk theatre performed in Thailand that combines glitzy costumes and vacillating plot narratives, thus relying on the actors' skills of improvisation and audience imagination. In this article, **Sukanya Sompiboon** focuses on the performance of likay in Japan, and the conceptual framework and practical principles for a performing troupe in a likay performance.

### Introduction

In October 2008, Makhampom Theatre Troupe (Thailand) was invited to perform in Yokohama, Japan. Its contemporary *likay* performance, entitled *The Message*, had previously been held at BankART 1992 and Kazu Ohno Dance Studio, through the sponsorship of the City of Yokohama and Agency of Cultural Affairs of Japan. It was also performed at Makhampom Studio, Bangkok, in 2007 and later at the Lido Multiplex Theatre, Bangkok, during the Bangkok Theatre Festival in November 2008. The performance, developed from *Naga Wong*,<sup>1</sup> focuses on local

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<sup>1</sup> Naga Wong, the legend of Naga that is deeply connected with the local people residing in the basin of the Mekong River, was an initial collaborative work of artists from 3 nations, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Performances were given at the Siam Society in Thailand in 2005; Cambodia in 2006; and Nong Khai province, the border of Thailand and Laos, in 2006. The performers spoke in Thai, Cambodian, and Lao dialects in the repertoire, while English subtitles were provided. *Naga Wong* reflected the changes of the Mekong River and the human lives associated with it. Thais represented the greedy people who were influenced by capitalism. They needed to catch a Naga to free them from suffering caused by the disaster. In this parody, the characters created an exhibition called 'Unseen Thailand', through which they gained more money from tourists. They hunted the Naga using an evil magic spell. By contrast, Laotian performers took the role of people who always respected the Naga, while the Cambodians performed as the Naga and his wife.

and global social concerns, about people being threatened and victimised as a result of industrialisation and economic developments. It illustrates the negative aspects and self-interest of humans, with a theme based on the sufferings of people living in the Mekong River area in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. The lives of these people are made miserable by the drought resulting from a dam project in China, and they manage to survive only through self-interest. Various groups hatch their own plans to steal the Naga to benefit themselves (the Naga is believed to be a good luck charm, bringing prosperousness to the land).

## **Makhampom's Contemporary Likay Performance**

Having been developing for more than a decade without interruption, Makhampom has become a prominent troupe of contemporary *likay* in Thailand. Its performances signify the cooperative (re)interpretation of selected Thai myths, legends, and literature in a contemporary socio-cultural context and through a contemporary socio-cultural discourse. It features melodramatic and comic styles, along with contemporary staging, in a *likay* repertoire. Makhampom's scripts represent a hybrid form of theatrical elements (A. Amranand, personal communication, September 26, 2011), with its roots in the folk tradition. Its form of *likay* has developed via a social-efficacy route that goes beyond artistic form. This inroad into the reinvention of *likay* performance brings various challenges in terms of socio-cultural reconceptualisation.

Makhampom's contemporary *likay* provides perspectives on the ability of *likay* to promote the transformation of performance discourse and practice in a socio-cultural context that currently, and to some extent, encourages a dialogue on social efficacy. In addition to employing a combination of Eastern and Western approaches to performing, Makhampom's contemporary *likay*, which developed within a cultural frame of reference in Thailand, exemplifies the coalescence and crystallisation of traditional and contemporary forms in the creative process. The group adopts modern performing approaches, techniques, and designs, and blend conventional *likay* elements, such as *ok khaek* (a prelude dance in Indian style), with audience participation. For that reason, its contemporary *likay* productions, which are well-scripted and well-produced, can be precisely understood and appreciated by a wide range of audiences.

Makhampom has attempted to develop an innovative type of *likay* that incorporates issues of local and global concerns, featuring characters who represent proponents as well as victims of materialism and selfishness. This thematic content, very much tied to the middle class, reflects earnestness, realism, and interpretation of values. Makhampom's contemporary *likay* is therefore both entertaining, and provokes serious contemplation. As writer Amitha Amranand (2009) states: "the jolly traditional *likay* is capable of the kind of depth and perceptiveness that Pradit gives his creations." Pradit Prasartthong is an actor-director and playwright of contemporary *likay* performances, including *Naga Wong* and *The Message*. "What makes his *likay* stands out, however, is the artist's daringness to venture into the dark side and stay there. You come out of Makhampom's *likay* remembering as much about how it had made you laugh as how it hadn't. Watching a *likay* by Pradit hardly feels like sitting cosy on a couch," says Amranand.

Performing in *likay* limits the psychological viewpoint of the actors, due to the stylistic requirements of playing a *likay*-type character involving specific movement, dancing, and singing. Despite this, personalisation of a character is used in *The Message*, achieved through the performers having to find the characters' objectives, and thereby making the cameo roles more realistic. Prasartthong wanted to demonstrate an intolerable situation with the trapped people managing to survive only through self-interest. Each group hatches their own plan to steal the Naga as it is believed to be a good luck charm to bring prosperity to the land. As a result, the character types were usually performed with a more explicit human sensibility, achieved via the acting dimension through the actors' expressions. For example, the aggression of the Naga Malan and his wife, Jantia, when they transformed into human beings, had to be clear and strong. This, therefore, was reflected in their vocal and eye communication. In the same manner, the character Princess Busadi, who was always modest and pleasant in the virtuous manner of a typical fairytale princess, would look wicked when she thought about her country and her people who had been destroyed by another kingdom. Boonporn, who played Princess Busadi, switched the 'performing' role to that of 'acting' as a person, representing a real problem of undeveloped countries that were overwhelmed by more powerful countries. This acting approach, together with the stylising approach of *likay*, added more layers to the performance.

## ***The Message Begins* and *The Message*: Two Performances in Japan**

*The Message Begins* was the introduction of *The Message* which was performed on the first day of the 4-day event. The performance took place on a floating stage, at a pier near BankART Studio, part of Yokohama BankART space. Temporary seats were set for an audience of more than three hundred. The Japanese producers' intention was to make a remarkable and stunning performance by which a random audience of passers-by and those who had just left work would be persuaded to see *The Message*, which followed *The Message Begins* at BankART 1992 studio.

In both performances, the full *ok khaek* dance was presented, as an introduction.<sup>2</sup> This exciting introduction followed the *likay* convention, drawing attention and preparing the Japanese audience, who were not familiar with the percussive, flamboyant, and flirtatious style of a *likay* performance. Although the production maintained this *likay* identity, modern dance and music were also part of the show, including an English song. This song was created from a mix of Thai folk music from *tareekipus*, a Muslim fan dance and rap beat-style music along with the *piphat* classical Thai music that features wind and percussion instruments. A mocking Indian-style dance in the first section was followed by a hip-hop dance style in the second part of the song, returning to an Indian style again in the concluding section. The last sentence of the song were sung in a traditional *likay* prelude style melody. The lyrics are:

(the first section, a *tareekipus*)

*Hi everybody, come to see likay  
that we proudly present as entertainment for you today  
Please enjoy this popular Thai folk opera  
we call likay*

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<sup>2</sup>The *ok khaek* language used in *The Message Begins* was English while the Thai language was used in *The Message* except for the *ok khaek* song.

(the second section, a rap beat)

*Welcome everybody - it's time to see likay  
Likay is exciting; it's more than I can say  
You will be amazed by the great likay  
Enjoy Thai songs, Thai dance, Thai music, and Thai play  
Life is too crazy; be happy anyway  
Forget your crazy life; leave it behind, throw it away*

(the third section, *tareekipus* and *likay* prelude)

*Follow me, let me share my stories  
Take it easy; you will be OK.  
Whatever will be, let's see likay*



*“Ok Khaek”, or Indian-style dance, is presented as a prelude dance in The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008.  
(Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

Apart from the *ok khaek* prelude dance, a brief narration is typically used in *likay* performance. The performer summarises the show by narrating the story. It can also be used as a synopsis after the *ok khaek* has finished or as a linking narration between each scene.

In *The Message Begins*, Princess Busadi of Suwannakorn Kingdom is looking for a man to protect her kingdom, which suffers from lack of rain and water in the river, increasing poverty. Her kingdom also comes under attack by the Dragon King of the Great Kingdom. The one who can protect her kingdom from disaster and war will become her husband.

Audience participation is one of the main elements of a *likay* performance, and is also normally used in Makhampom's contemporary *likay*. In the same performance, the audience was invited to take part in the singing, allowing an interaction between an actor and spectator. The audience was persuaded to say "Hai" at the end of phrases of the lyrics.

Another example of audience participation was in a comical scene in *The Message*. Here, a clown named Oishi, performed by a cross-dressing actor, demonstrated to the audience how to mix a prescription, conveyed through very droll gestures. After finishing the demonstration, he asked for a volunteer amongst the audience to come onto the stage to help him compound the medicine, again conveyed by funny movements and a swaying-of-hip gesture.



*The atmosphere of the floating stage which has Yokohama city's night as its backdrop in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photos courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*Princess Busadi asks her servant, Oishi, to announce the search for a prince to be her mate in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*The three competitive princes show off their talents to Princess Busadi in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

*The Japanese butoh performer leads Makhampom's likay actors to the floating stage's exit.  
(Photos courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



## Development of Space and Stage Modification

As a result of space limitation, and also design experimentation, the backdrop and props in *The Message*, performed at Makhampom Studio in 2007, reflected minimal set design. A plain backdrop replaced the decorated wooden one in order to project light, enhance effect, and impose English subtitles upon it. Wooden steps, painted white, were used as a throne bench and cliffs, a change from the wooden stool that is always placed in the centre of a stage in traditional *likay*. Although a large space was available at the Lido Multiplex movie house when the performance was held there in 2008, this contemporary design, which used only some of the indicative props of a *likay* performance, continued to be used for both the artists and the audience to explore and nurture creativity through a minimalist design.

The steps were replaced by a black-step platform, used as a backdrop that divided the front and the back of the stage. The stage floor was black as well, allowing the necessary lighting and visual effects to be employed in this shadowy atmosphere. Director Pradit Prasartthong, somewhat shrewdly, took advantage of a big movie-screen behind the stage for projecting images onto it. Such images, which related to the specific scene, were projected onto the back screen to abridge an action that linked with the following scene. An example of this can be seen in a throne hall shadow image, projected in a wedding scene, and designed to lessen the scale of stage-prop decoration, whilst simultaneously providing the *likay* convention to the audience. Additionally, a leather shadow-puppet of a Naga sketch was utilised with clear light, indicating the appearance or disappearance of the Naga Malan in each scene.



*A character disguises herself by wearing sunglasses. A kettle is humorously used as a conch shell in the water blessing of a wedding ceremony scene in *The Message* at Makhamptom Studio (2007). (Photo courtesy of Makhamptom Theatre Troupe)*



*The *Message* productions at Makhamptom Studio and at Lido Multiplex in Bangkok Theatre Festival (2007). (Photo courtesy of Makhamptom Theatre Troupe)*

The stage design was changed again when *The Message* was performed in Japan at the BankART, Yokohama in 2008. At this location, the performance took place on a floating stage in the river, and used the scenery of Yokohama night as a stunningly large natural backdrop. The Japanese stage crews had the creative idea of using a boat as a small backdrop, dividing the boundary of the floating stage and the river, as well as providing an empty space in the boat as the changing room. Unfortunately, they were unable to implement this due to the boat being unable to be used as a screen for projecting Japanese subtitles; consequently, they built white steps with a white plain screen for that purpose. The steps could also function as a throne and a cliff as well, with the spare space behind this abrupt architecture functioning as the back area of the stage. However, as all the performers were not able to use this space as a changing room, more space was provided on the bank behind the audience.



The slope of the bridge was fixed in relation to the flow and ebb of the tide. On the second night, the tide was very low, causing the bridge to be extremely sloped, and walking and running across was undertaken with difficulty. Notwithstanding the unexpected circumstance, solutions to such problems were found through improvisational skills that lie at the heart of performing *likay*. Light and sound effects were wholly employed during the show. A red light, for example, was used to indicate the appearance of a wicked character that had been transformed from his or her previous good character. When the Naga was angry, a thunderclap of light and sound was applied. The most difficult aspect of the production's effects was using them in a sequential order. A controller had to remember the gestures and movements of the actors, cues that were not familiar to him. However, after ten rehearsals, he was able to operate the effects accurately.



*The other floated stage for The Message. There are only 4 rows of seat for the audience (2 rows are on the left side and the other 2 rows are on the right side. The stairs for entrance and exit are in the middle) The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*Japanese subtitles are projected onto the wooden backdrop in The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

## Lesson from Japanese Audiences

Japanese audiences offered lessons in terms of understanding the differences in appreciation of a performance. There is no sharp dividing line that define who are the actors and audiences in viewing *likay*; on the other hand, audience participation is always encouraged by the performers. In the context of Thai folk-popular theatre, audiences do not need to be connoisseurs, but to some degree should participate in a show in many possible ways of interaction such as laughing, shouting, talking, acclaiming or clapping during a performance, which could invigorate a mood of

viewing and acting. Japanese audiences often stay calm and quiet because they do not want to break the performers' concentration. This reaction is undesirable for a *likay* show. The *likay* performance needs constant audience interactions. A passive audience diminishes a *likay* performance.

On the first night of performing *The Message*, the audience kept silent, and did not react at all, neither laughing nor responding even when asked. Such is the Japanese viewing culture that the actors and group learned much about how to meet the challenges of playing to audiences of various cultures. The performance troupe adapted its performance by adding a short section of Japanese language in the dialogue on the second night, bridging a gap between performers and audiences. For example, as the character (Naga's wife) was looking for her husband, she asked the audience in English, 'Do you see my husband?' No one laughed or reacted. When they were asked in Japanese '*Watashino Danna Sang Mite Ma Sang Ga?*', the audience smiled or giggled in response. More audience participation was solicited by inviting some of them onto the stage to join a funny scene, explaining to them in simple English and Japanese. The mood of the performance changed drastically in the last two rounds when Thai audiences residing in Yokohama participated by presenting garlands and flowers to performers, yelling and clapping their hands throughout the performance, which encouraged Japanese audiences to join in. The reaction of the audiences boosted the performers' energy. *The Message* was eventually well-received by the local audience in Japan.

## References

- Amranand, A. (2009). Venturing the Dark Side of Likay: Thai Comedic Folk Music Performance that Exposes the Ugly Side of Humans, *Bangkok Post*, 18 November 2009, p. 8.

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