

A Temporary Port of Call: *Our Routes ⇄ Right Now* in Bangkok

Thailand has been one of the world's top tourist destinations for many years and Thai food now ranging now among the world's favorite cuisines. Thai dance and theatre, however, have had little exposure on the world stage and their entries in encyclopedias are usually shorter than those on dance and theatre in such neighbouring countries as Cambodia and Indonesia. Within Southeast Asia as a whole, a foreigner's experience of its performing arts, either from festivals in Europe and the US or in a certain Southeast Asian country, is mostly limited to traditional forms and stories. This contrasts with how Southeast Asian dance and theatre artists have studied and adapted both traditional and modern forms and stories from Europe and the US for several decades now.

Meanwhile, Singapore has been regarded as the region's most prominent port of call as it is situated right in the middle of the trade route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As is popularly observed, Bangkok might instead have earned this status, were a canal dug at the narrowest point of the Indochina peninsula, the 44-kilometre Kra Isthmus. This applies not only for trade but in recent years for dance and theatre as well. Thanks to the much larger financial resource than those of its neighbouring countries, for many audiences Singapore is the region's only destination to watch international tours of major dance and theatre productions from Europe and the US such as BAM, The Old Vic and Neal Street's "The Bridge Project" and "Sylvie Guillem—6,000 Miles Away", the latter co-produced by the Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay. Besides, often seen in many performing arts venues in Singapore are European and American producers who attend performances from neighbouring countries, which have been commissioned or supported by Singaporean producers. That is to say, Singapore has also become a gateway—if not a gatekeeper—for Southeast Asian dance and theatre.

Our Roots ⇄ Right Now: The Research Forum and Festival of Thai/ASEAN Contemporary Theatre

From 19 to 28 January, 2013, the Department of Dramatic Arts at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's first tertiary academic institution to offer bachelor's and master's degrees in western theatre, organised the inaugural event *Our Roots ⇄ Right Now*. Billed as "the research forum and festival of Thai/

ASEAN contemporary theatre”, it also included masterclasses, discussions and performances by mostly classically trained dance artists from seven Southeast Asian nations in addition to China and India as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), upcoming on January 1, 2015, wants to retain its close connection to these two countries outside the region.

Project director Dangkamon Na Pombejra, who chairs the department, explains that *Our Roots ⇄ Right Now* is divided into four interconnected components: “Research”, “Revue”, “Appreciation” and “Evaluation”. “Research” comprises “presentations of academic papers by various guests of honour, and research and creative works from the “Our Roots Right Now: Ramayana project”, which has been substantially supported by the Thailand Research Fund.”

“Revue” comprises “diverse contemporary performances developed from Thai/ASEAN cultural roots”. The curtain rose every evening at the Sodsai Pantoomkomol Centre for Dramatic Arts—the 16 meter by 25 meter by 10 meter black box theatre on campus—and one ticket is for a triple-bill. The program changed every two days. “Appreciation” includes “post-performance discussions, exchanges of experiences among artists, and workshop sessions.” “Evaluation” comprises “roundtable sessions that analyse and sum up the key insights and knowledge gained from the program.” These last three components were fully supported by the host university’s ASEAN budget.

Dangkamon Na Pombejra further said he hoped that “the diverse research presentations, performances, workshops, and assessments of contemporary Asian dance and theatre in this unique event will enable all artists, educators, and anyone interested in the arts to exchange information and experiences about creating dynamic and compelling contemporary performances.” Moreover, “by bridging original cultural roots with current lifestyles, arts, ethical themes, contemporary Thai and ASEAN dance and theatre will further develop their intellectual, aesthetic and social reaches.”

The ten-day forum and festival held 33 dance and theatre performances, 13 masterclasses, 27 academic paper presentations, and roundtable discussion sessions. Festival curators and producers from Austria, China, Korea and Singapore also visited this temporary port of call. It is noteworthy that the forum received more attention than the Bangkok Theatre Festival, the annual showcase of contemporary Thai theatre, which has been held every November by the Bangkok Theatre Network since 2002.

Overall, the forum and festival showed diverse examples of how artists in the region are working with traditional sources, in terms of both style and content. Attendance at the academic forum on the first two days was low, possibly due to English being the working language. Notably, the term ICHpa (Intangible Cultural Heritage in performing arts) was rarely mentioned in the presentations and in the discussions—perhaps an alarming sign for future research into this field. A good sign was that the performances, which made use of the more universal language of physical movement, were well attended. Many audience



members at the Sodsai Pantoomkomol Centre for Dramatic Arts stayed after the triple-bill performance late in the evening to share their opinions with the artists. Unfortunately, like a great many first ASEAN-related cultural events taking place in Thailand recently in preparation for the AEC unification, the future of *Our Roots ⇌ Right Now* remains unclear.

Representative Performances

Three performances seen at this temporary port of call are selected here for further discussion:

- Pichet Klunchun Dance Company's *Tam Kai*

Renowned dancer and choreographer Pichet Klunchun, the most frequently travelled Thai performing artist in recent years, was honoured with a "Silpathorn Award in Performing Arts" by the Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Arts and Culture in 2006. In Europe and America, he is usually referred to as a *Khon* (classical masked dance theatre) performer, rather the opposite to what the Thai audience would do.

In the Thailand premiere of Pichet Klunchun Dance Company's *Tam Kai*, Phra Lo, the hero in Thai literature *Lilit Phra Lo* was lured by a magically beautiful cock to travel to another city where he fell in love with two princesses, which finally led to their tragic doom. Klunchun had a different message here.

The seven dancers walked on to stage, each with his or her own tumbler of water. They queued at the upstage left corner and



one by one moved in his/her individual style diagonally towards the downstage right corner. While some were slightly inspired by the one in front of him/her in the queue, others simply ignored it. For the next half hour, the audience witnessed a myriad of movements, generally diverse, thoroughly pleasant and frequently hilarious, from each individual dancer. One brought his tumbler to centre stage, took a sip of water: that was his dance.

Afterwards, the dance movements shifted to classical Thai and the dancers performed the episode by the book, notwithstanding the rubber cock. A few “patrons” walked down from their seats in the stands. One gave Klunchun a large Thai garland to which many bank notes were attached; another took a “selfie” of the two of them with her smartphone and instantly uploaded it to her Facebook.

In *Tam Kai*, Klunchun, thus, was cheekily questioning whether contemporary Thai audiences are being lured by the beauty of our classical dance, thereby forgetting that there’s much more to it than just gorgeous movements. Another question was whether the rigidity of dance traditions is restricting the individual dancer in a contemporary art world filled with creative freedom. He also emphasised that Thailand’s contemporary dance is not only about the relationship between the past and the present, but also the here and the elsewhere, as we have opened our arms to foreign influences throughout our history.

Subsequently, *Tam Kai* was staged in eight cities in the Netherlands in October 2013. In February 2014, Klunchun also applied his production concept to recreate the work with workshop participants in Osaka. A contemporary dance work based on tradition, *Tam Kai* is still in



the company's repertory and its next ports of call are likely to be announced soon.

- Daniel Kok's Q&A

Singaporean performance artist Daniel Kok made his Thailand debut with *Q&A*, a conceptual dance work that was commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival in 2009, and later seen in Edinburgh, Lisbon, Hong Kong, Berlin and Vienna.

Kok, adorned in a striking red fur dress, first danced to a seven-minute excerpt from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. He then changed into a white shirt, a tie, a business jacket and a pair of eyeglasses and still in his black underpants, pushed out a supermarket shopping cart from backstage and spoke to us through a microphone. With the help of a Powerpoint presentation on the screen and note cards in his hand, he explained that before arriving, he had conducted an online survey with his potential audience members, most of whom were present. In the survey, he had asked how they wanted him to perform his contemporary dance, covering topics like narratives, subject matter, general movement, aspects of dance, music and sound elements. Having analysed the survey results, he performed *Madama Butterfly*, incorporating the audience's suggestions as best as he could, because he wanted his performance to be, in his word, "desirable".

He then conducted a live survey with a fewer number of topics and adjusted his performance accordingly for his last dance. In the first evening, for example, the audience voted for pop and rock music, and accordingly he danced to Meatloaf's "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)"; a day later, the audience voted for "traditional Thai

music”, and so a Mo *Lam* (Northeastern Thai folk) song was being played. The audience on both evenings voted for “a mystery man” costume, and two stagehands wrapped yellow and black tape over parts of his limbs and body. His movements, however, largely remained the same notwithstanding the change in music. And that is one of the issues he wanted to discuss with the audience: “artists’ intentions” versus “audience’ expectations” in contemporary arts.

At one moment during the discussion monologue, Kok said that he would rather have his audience think about this performance after we left the theatre, than just expecting to enjoy it.

Q&A was staged as part of the evening’s quadruple bill that also included *Bach Cello Suites* and *Ferocious Compassion* by Cambodia’s Amrita Performing Arts and Chiang Mai-based dancer and choreographer Waewdao Sirisook’s *Faun Leb/Identity*, developed from the traditional northern Thai long-nailed dance. When the three artists shared the stage at the post-show Q&A, the audience witnessed just how diverse contemporary Southeast Asia is. An audience member asked Kok, who evidently does not have any training in traditional dance, to relate his performance to the theme of the festival *Our Roots ⇄ Right Now*. Kok replied that, despite being of Chinese descent, it was MTV music videos that inspired him to dance and noted that for him “contemporary” is everything that is happening here and now.

That triggered another observation. Contemporary performances from our region that are visiting ports of call for audiences from all around the world are mostly based on traditions, even though they are not purely traditional works any more. Yet, what most of us are watching more on our home soils are contemporary performances that are not based on traditions but deal with contemporary issues and are presented in modern styles.

Following Bangkok, the ports of call for Q&A were the Tokyo Performing Arts Market (Yokohama, February 2013), B:OM Festival (Seoul, March 2013), In Transit Festival (Berlin, August 2013) and Platforma Festival (Moscow, June 2014).

- Tanzconnexions’ *Fire, Fire, Fire*

Fire, Fire, Fire: Contemporary Southeast Asian Choreography featured three different versions of “Sita’s Trial by Fire”, an episode of *Ramayana* by three of the region’s leading choreographers: Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Eko Supriyanto and Pichet Klunchun, and their companies, Khmer Arts, Solo Dance Studio and Pichet Klunchun Dance Company from Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand respectively. The production was the final result of a two-year project fully funded by the Goethe Institut’s Tanzconnexions project and was seen in Phnom Penh before traveling to *Our Roots ⇄ Right Now*, and Jakarta and Solo afterwards.

In Bangkok, the full-house audience witnessed our multi-faceted Southeast Asia through three 20-minute dance pieces performed continuously without an intermission. Shapiro’s work was more literary—not just because of the Khmer lyrics with English surtitles—than the other two and did not venture as far from the tradition. It is reasonable to assume that this was the reason why it was the opener of the triple bill.

Klunchun played with the image of fire, and his company members’



movements looked like those of western modern dance yet also showed traces and the philosophy of classical Thai roots. It seemed that he was also trying to disappoint some audience members by not giving them what they wanted—the exotic images of Thailand. The most choreographically riveting of the three, Supriyanto worked on the notion of confrontation and showed how various traditions have been blended and processed into a unique contemporary dance vocabulary.

At the post-show discussion, which lasted as long as the performance itself, the three choreographers were joined onstage by Hong Kong's experimental art pioneer and internationally revered theatre director, Danny Yung. Shapiro explained the development of this unique project over the past three years, saying that a production had not originally been planned, only a sharing of knowledge and ideas among the members of the three companies through workshops.

Curious about the collaboration, Yung asked why each choreographer did not try working with the dancers of the other two companies and why the show did not feature a fourth part—one they could have had created together. They did not give a direct answer, and the audience is left to assume that the reason is either they did not have enough time or that the dancers were still confined to their training and artistic director, or master. In any case, such a collaboration could perhaps be the next phase of development, once they become reacquainted with one another.

Klunchun reminded the audience that the three troupes are not representative of their countries, but in fact are, in his words, “trouble makers”, because of what they are doing to their dance and



theatre traditions. He also noted that the differences in their three choreographic pieces show how time has progressed differently in each country, and that this also causes the modern features of the performances to vary, at least to a certain extent.

Nonetheless, this project serves as a possible model for the development of contemporary dance in the region although it is evident that we still have a long way to go.

There were no other ports of call for *Fire, Fire, Fire*. The scale of the production, with the total number of 30 cast and crew members from three countries, probably outweighed its artistic merits.

Conclusion

In contrast to the images of Southeast Asia being represented by touristic posters highlighting ancient sites and traditional cultures as well as the representative tradition-based performing art works that are being presented in festivals, which are perhaps more luring to European and American tastes, the aforementioned three performances in *Our Roots ⇄ Right Now* are not simply presenting exotic images. Instead, they show more complex, and realistic, images of contemporary Southeast Asia, with the relationships between and among “traditional” and “modern”; “local”, “foreign”, and “global”; as well as “intercultural” and “intra-cultural”.

Nevertheless, we should never forget the fact that tradition-based performance from this region travel farther, more frequently and conveniently. On the other hand, a number of contemporary dance and

theatre performances by Southeast Asian artists, which are not based on their respective country's traditions, but rather on western ones, were not part of this international platform. In other words, they had not filled any container at this temporary port of call.

For example, Thailand's physical theatre company B-Floor staged their work *Flu-O-Less-Sense* in Tokyo; and *Oxygen* and *Taste of Curry* in New York City, without any support from Thailand's Ministry of Culture. Also, it is doubtful that Democrazy Theatre Studio's highly acclaimed production of Ionesco's *The Chairs* in 2012 can find the next port of call by any invitation of a foreign producer, despite their being honoured with the highest prize by the Thailand center of the International Association of Theatre Critics.

As a citizen of a culinary heaven, I would like to conclude with a food metaphor. When my European and American friends ask me for a tip on how to find a good Thai restaurant overseas, my answer is, first, they should try to avoid the ones with such names that would be automatically associated with traditional Thailand as "Siam", "Elephant" or "Sukhothai"—for example, my favourite authentic Thai restaurant in Michigan is simply called "Thai Thai". My next tip is that they should look for ones without touristic posters, Thai musical instruments, Buddha images and waitresses in traditional Thai costumes—my best experience in overseas Thai restaurants have been in ones with no table cloths and waitresses in T-shirts and jeans. My last tip is to ensure that the majority of the patrons at the restaurant are themselves Asians.

Images courtesy of Sodsai Pantoomkomol Centre for Dramatic Arts.