

Adaptation of Thai Traditional Plays on the Thai Contemporary Stage: Finding an Identity for the Modern Thai Theatre

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Abstract

In Thailand, traditional theatre and modern theatre are categorized separately from each other. While traditional theatre still performs in traditional ways in which dance and music are used as the main elements to tell a story, the term 'modern theatre' or Lakhon Wethi Samai Mai refers to theatre which is performed in Western theatre's style.

The awareness of the dominance of the influence of western theatre on Thai theatre has encouraged some Thai artists to look for native Thai material in order to create an identity for modern Thai theatre. These artists claim that translated western plays are inaccessible to Thai audiences due to cultural differences, and so turn to their own cultural theatre roots. These artists share a similar interest in Thai traditional theatre; they believe that traditional dramatic literature could better communicate with Thai audiences than western plays. Therefore, they adapt traditional literature to be performed on the modern stage: in addition to a text, some traditional theatrical elements are also applied in their performances

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the different methods used by contemporary Thai artists to approach traditional literatures. By drawing on examples of adaptations of traditional Thai literature, I aim to show the potential of traditional literature to become an efficient source for the creation of a contemporary Thai script and how adaptation of traditional play could not only be the initial step in creating an identity for the modern Thai theatre, but also a significant way to prompt Thai playwrights to discover an originality for their contemporary scripts that avoids a predominant reliance on the Western theatre.

An awareness of the tremendous influence of Westernization has encouraged some Thai artists to search for their own version of an identity for modern Thai theatre. As it directly adopted its form from Western theatre, the development of modern Thai theatre appears to have little to do with indigenous performance. Traditional and modern Thai theatres are different in their aesthetic concept and original forms of performing, so the links between them are tenuous. By emphasising the preservation of the traditional way of performing, established theatre has become less relevant to modern Thai audiences. While modern Thai theatre relies on Western ideas and influences, contemporary Thai artists aim to find a new inspiration and identity.

Even though the clear separation between traditional and modern Thai theatre occurred in the mid-1960s, when western-style theatre was re-introduced to Thai society as a part of drama curriculum in universities, in fact the influence of Westernization on Thai theatre began during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). However, during that earlier period, Thai artists had adopted western elements in order to enhance the traditional form of dance drama, creating new kinds of Thai performance to suit the changing tastes of Thai audiences under the impact of Westernization; Rutnin (1996) mentions the theatre during this time as 'the harmony of combination'. She further states that 'However, it seems at the present that the harmony between the classical and the modern, the old and the new is no longer a strong point' (1996:252). Her opinion is that a combination like this is rarely seen in the current period.

Traditional Thai theatre has its own unique way of performing, in which dance and music are used as the main elements to tell a story. Each dance gesture illustrates the expression of the script in which the characters' actions and dialogues are described. The script is sung together with dance patterns either by actors or choruses based on the individual style of each genre. A traditional play is composed in verse form. Each theatre genre has its own repertoire; some stories, such as *Ramakien*, restricted to court performances. Buddhist beliefs and Thai moral lessons commonly appear in the themes of these stories. Most of the scripts that are currently performed are adjusted from the texts that were written more than a hundred years ago. Traditional theatre tends to be regarded as a national heritage rather than entertainment for Thai people,

and traditional scripts are familiar to audiences as classical literature which is taught in schools.

With the dominance of western theatre's influence on modern Thai theatre, some Thai artists have turned to their own traditional theatrical sources in an attempt to create modern plays that communicate with Thai audiences better than translated western scripts. Kertdarunsuksri (2001) claims that the transformation of traditional literature on the modern stage was a popular trend during the 1990s when more than twenty adapted productions were created. After that period of growth, some well-known artists still continue their exploration in this area. These artists share a personal interest in traditional theatre with a belief that it could be a valuable source in creating a contemporary performance that could communicate with modern Thai audiences. These artists include Patravadi Mejudhon, Pornrat Damrhung, Makamphom Theatre Group and Dangkamon Na-Pombejra.

In order to transpose traditional literature onto the modern stage, Thai artists have their own ways to adapt traditional plays which create a unique quality in their adaptation. Patravadi Mejudhon¹ modernized a traditional story in order to re-present it within the current social context. The original plot was deconstructed in order to emphasise the theme of a traditional story. Characters in her new version were adapted to be well-rounded and appeared relevant in a contemporary sense. Her deep interest in her own cultural roots and her intention to present the value of traditional literature is seen in the way quotations from the original source appear to play an important part in her adaptation. Finally, the traditional elements such as dance and singing are juxtaposed in her pieces, to enhance the performance and appeal to Thai audiences.

¹ Patravadi Mejudhon is a well-known artist. She is a legendary actress as well as a renowned director and playwright. Her works appear in movies, television and on stage. She is the owner of *Patravadi Theatre*, an open-air theatre located adjacent to Chao Phya River bank and the royal temple, Wat Rakang, Bangkok. Producing many performances that are based on traditional Thai literature, her theatre has earned a reputation for its popular modernized adaptations of traditional literary works. To preserve and promote Thai arts and culture is one of her theatre's policies. Her productions include *Lo'dilokrat*, *Singhakraiphop*, *Inao-Joraka*, *Ngo'Pa* and *Sahatsadecha*.

While Patravadi tries to interpret traditional literature with the aim of modernizing the story, Pornrat Damrong² chooses to present through her works a new interpretation of traditional literature. Her works focus on the main female characters instead of the males. Her productions usually portray the suffering of these female characters due to social inequality, with the intention to arouse the audience to understand traditional works from a modern point of view. The impressive spectacle of her performances comes from her unique style and modernizing of traditional elements, especially traditional dance and music which are adapted and used as important tools to deliver the message to audiences. Apart from her feminist views, the presentation of her performance has become one of her most significant hallmarks.

Meanwhile, for the Makhampom troupe³, traditional literature is the tool to deliver their social messages to audiences. They use the audience's familiarity with traditional literature as a bridge to connect their performance with them. Consequently, their main aim of reconstructing the plot and reinterpreting the characters is to address the group's new social message rather than put an importance to the old theme of the original.

The attempt to modernize traditional literature by reinterpreting it from a modern perspective can be seen in Dangkamon⁴'s adaptation of *Sang Thong*. In his work, *The Miraculous Adventure of the Conch Prince*⁵, a traditional story is re-interpreted by

² Pornrat Damrhung is a lecturer of the department of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. She is a well-known theatre practitioner whose many works have been inspired by traditional theatre and literature. Working in the educational institute, most of her works are produced within the educational context which allows her to use her performances as a tool for research and experimentation particularly in areas that may be difficult to do in commercial theatre. Her renowned performances in the adaptation of traditional literature include Kham Rak lae Kham Tai (1996), Nonthuk (1997), Lui Fai (2005) and Sita-Siram (2006).

³ The Makhampom Theatre Group was established in 1981; it is one of the leading troupes and is well-known for works produced with the socio-political objectives of the NGO movement. The members of the troupe consist of both employees and volunteers. Their funding source usually comes from state and international organizations. Their performances are in various styles from the traditional style to the contemporary theatre, and are staged from rural areas to international theatre festivals abroad. Most of their productions are aimed at educating their audiences regarding the social development issues.

⁴ Dangkamon Na-Pombejra is one of the best-known practitioners of modern theatre in Thailand. He is a lecturer in the Department of Dramatic Arts at Chulalongkorn University. Most of his works are translated and adapted from Western plays. However, in 2006, he created a production adapted from the traditional play, *The Miraculous Adventure of the Conch Prince*.

⁵ This performance formed part of the research project, *Legends Retold*, conducted by Chulalongkorn University's Department of Dramatic Arts. The project, which was supported by The Thailand Research Fund, aims to study the processes of recreating the scripts and performances of Thai traditional literature. Written and directed by Dangkamon Na-Pombejra, this performance is based on *Sang Thong*, one of the best-known traditional Thai literary masterpieces.

comparing it to contemporary society. However, apart from referring to the original story, he prominently uses and emphasises western techniques. By contrast, traditional Thai elements rarely appear in this production. The deconstruction of the plot and reinterpretation of characters are purposely created as to emphasize this version's selected message of self-illusion rather than aiming to restrict to the original version.

In re-presenting traditional literary works, these practitioners have their own unique ways to adapt traditional plays. This paper shall discuss two approaches which these artists had used in order to create an unique quality and an identity to their works as well as to Thai contemporary plays.

Reinforcement of a sense of familiarity

In my opinion, one of the advantages of creating a play based on traditional literature is that Thai audiences might feel familiar with the plot, characters and context, and this is one of main reasons why many Thai artists return to the traditional sources; with the same cultural roots, they believe that a traditional play could better communicate with Thai audiences.

The sense of familiarity is exploited in Makampom's adaptations as the main method to deliver their new messages to audiences. With the broad familiarity with the stories, Phradit Phrasarthong, the founder and the leader of the group, believes that adaptations of traditional literature are more accessible to rural audiences (Kerdarunsuksri, 2001:211); Barber clarifies that this acquaintance provides "a culture bridge" which "offered the freedom for the group to deconstruct the text" (2007:207).

In the investigation of the achievement of Patravadi's theatre, Maneerat (2008) indicates that the reinforcement of a sense of familiarity is one of Patravadi's main strategies to popularize the strong female characters in her works. One of these familiarities is offered through the way she presents the renowned characters from beloved Thai literature and folktales.

While her work highlights the oppressive conditions to which the female characters have been subjected and which have gone unnoted in previous versions, the retelling of Thai literature retains a sense of familiarity.

(Maneerat, 2008:192)

Frequently, Thai artists choose to present in their adaptations memorable scenes, famous original texts or recognised songs that were specifically composed for the original; the appearance of well-known aspects of tradition heightens the sense of familiarity. Not only does it create a familiar atmosphere, it also fulfils the expectations of an audience to see what they know or remember from an original version. Additionally, this shows the appreciation of these artists toward traditional theatre; the beauty of the sources is confirmed by the reappearance of them on the modern stage. Consequently, this suggests that the sense of familiarity could be developed as a significant tool in adapting a traditional play. It contributes to the success of an adaptation in two ways. First, it gives audiences a comfortable feeling of seeing things that they know or feel familiar with. In this aspect, the sense of familiarity provides a cultural bridge that connects audiences with a new play. Second, it supports the emergence of a new message. The reinforcement of familiarity performs a significant function, especially when an adaptation deals with the parallel image of traditional stories and contemporary society; the satire involved in this comparison may be more comprehensible to an audience who 'knows' more of a previous version. Without enough knowledge of a traditional text, it is difficult or even impossible for an audience to understand a new message that an adaptation aims to present.

Another important step is to identify what the familiarity of a traditional play for Thai people is, and how to apply it in a process of adaptation in order to achieve an effective result. With the Thai audience's limited knowledge of traditional plays, the reinforcement of familiarity may be necessary in order to make them understand a new play: as Hutcheon states "as audience members, we need memory in order to

experience differences as well as similarity” (2006: 22). This subject, therefore, should be carefully examined in an adaptation of a traditional play.

Application of the traditional elements

It could be said that one of the motivations of the Thai contemporary artists to continue experimenting in this field comes from their personal interest in Thai traditional theatre. Different in their ways of adaptation, what they have in common is an attempt to give a new life to a traditional theatre form. Their admiration for their own kind of theatre can be seen in the way they choose to apply traditional elements in their works. In order to transform traditional plays to the modern stage, not only they do make use of the original script, but also some traditional elements are borrowed and experimented with in their adaptations; the exploration in the performance presentation becomes the significant hallmark of some artists.

Thai traditional theatre has its own unique style of performing that differs from western theatre. For example, as same as other Southeast Asian theatre forms, music and dance perform an important role in Thai traditional theatre, which is often referred to by some scholars as dance-drama, since the story is told mainly through dance and singing: an actor performs his/her role by dancing and music is used not only to accompany the dance but also to allow the actors/ chorus to sing the dialogue and the description of scene and characters. However, it is claimed that, because the interpretation of these elements requires a deep-knowledge of their meaning, this decreases the interest of modern audience towards traditional theatre. Consequently, when these traditional elements become parts of the works, they will be adapted from the original forms in order to be easily accessible for modern audience. The techniques of adaptation vary from one artist to another. Each artist has his own unique method of adaptation to serve his own purpose. For example, the traditional elements are juxtaposed with Western elements in order to make the presentation appeal to Thai audiences; the complicated dance is simplified by using only basic gestures to make it understandable to the modern audiences. The traditional music is no longer used in the conventional way but applied to create atmosphere or sometimes juxtaposed with Western musical instruments.

It is notable that in most of the works, the adaptation is limited to representing the original forms in the broader ways rather than trying to achieve the modern audience's appreciation by finding the way to make them understand the original meaning and roles of these elements. It is possible that the artists are convinced that the modern audience are now too far removed from the times of the original performing arts, or it might possibly come from the lack of profound understanding from the artists' background themselves, whatever the real reason is, the result is that the artists keep only the forms from the original theatre to impress the modern audience.

An attempt to present the traditional elements on the modern stage fulfils artists' purposes in two aspects: first their aims to present the beauty of traditional theatre and second their attempt to make these traditional elements become understandable to a modern audience.

Since traditional theatre and literature are also considered to be parts of Thailand's national heritage, they are treated as highly refined art-forms and the original ways in which they were performed are believed to be strict models which need to be followed. Therefore, faithfulness to traditional customs is highly prized and respected among traditional Thai artists. Changes or modifications to traditional performing styles are seen as risky because they are believed by some to destroy traditional beauty.

Some contemporary artists whose works are experimented with traditional art forms have experienced negative responses from conservative audiences and artists. Pichet Kranchun, a contemporary Thai artist who is famous for creating a contemporary work based on traditional dance, often states that his work is "at a war with Thai culture", because his way of thinking and creating go against the convention. His work is not only "different" but also "offensive" to some audiences who expect to see a traditional theatre as the way it is. (Jungwiwattanaporn, 2008:14).

The reason that these traditional elements should still be applied in a modern adaptation because they show the unique characteristic of traditional Thai theatre. They perform unique functions within the dramatic structure of the play (Brandon, 1967:125). As they are inseparable companions of traditional performance, in order to find the identity of original modern Thai performance, these traditional elements are a vital method that should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

According to Kerdarunsuksri (2001), the transposition of traditional literary works into modern Thai stage drama resulted from the awareness of contemporary Thai artists of a need to create original Thai play to communicate with Thai audiences. Even though it seems that the adaptation of Thai traditional literature on the modern stage is not a mainstay of Thai theatre, there are some artists who have shown an interest in traditional Thai theatre and continue to create works based on traditional literature. These artists are very well-known and their works have received positive feedback from both critics and audiences, not only on domestic but also on international stages. The fact that these artists are constantly working on adaptations of traditional Thai theatre and the recognition that such adaptations have achieved show that this area of the performing arts is still worthy of investigation.

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