

# **EXPLORING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMON ROOTS: TWO NEW WAYS OF COMBINING CLASSICAL DANCE TRADITIONS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERFORMANCES**

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores two different attempts to make partnerships for the today's stage with teams of classically-trained Southeast Asian dancers in the last three years. Working in different conditions and toward different ends, the Cambodian and Thai dancers discussed in this paper combined their classical artistic training and interests into performances differently directed toward today's diverse dance audiences. In particular, this paper will reflect on two classically-grounded partnering projects I helped to bring into being as a contemporary theatre artist and producer: the masked dance (khon) performances done at the Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre in Bangkok and the Revitalising Monkeys and Giants work-in-progress with Cambodian and Thai artists. By focusing on how these pieces evolved due to their distinct blend of external conditions and artistic aims, I will raise questions about the multiple and complex reasons that prompt traditional artists to work together across national and genre boundaries in order to make*

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*new pieces that are meaningful to them and to their audiences. The larger questions raised in this essay will address the identity of these traditional artists in these new settings and what grounds the varied choices of performance partnerships for their diverse contemporary audiences. I will also consider whether these new linkages can help to strengthen dance traditions and enhance the confidence of traditional performers on the stage today.*

## **Introduction**

This essay explores some partnerships created by classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asia during the last three years. In particular, it considers some Cambodian and Thai artists who have crafted, individually and collectively, new opportunities for themselves by directing their shared classical artistic traditions in a contemporary direction. Their efforts resulted in performances that blended their own traditional skills with artistic ambitions to move today's diverse dance audiences. The pieces they crafted evolved out of partnerships that crossed genre and national boundaries, and blended their artistic ambitions with altered dance forms. These pieces linked their training to new audiences, and created a cultural niche for their art within the new globalized artistic environment their traditions inhabit. By examining these two recent examples as part of this larger process, the essay aims to remind readers that partnerships are nothing new in the arts, but also that traditional artists need to establish new alliances in order to ensure their traditional arts continue to thrive. In discussing these things, this essay will stress artists' strong desire to shape new dance pieces that are as meaningful to themselves as they are true to their teachers' legacy and their contemporary audiences.

Given the focus of this essay, some questions emerge, such as: What is the identity of traditional artists operating in these new settings? What grounds the varied types of performance partnerships and how they seek to reach their diverse contemporary audiences? How can these new linkages help strengthen dance traditions and enhance the confidence of traditional performers on the stage today?

Before exploring these issues, this essay first considers their background before detailing how and why these two different groups of artists in mainland Southeast Asia created new artistic partnerships from common sources, and then go on to suggest some tentative answers to the above questions.

## **Background**

Traditions, new and old, are apparently more visible in some parts of the world than in others. I have often wondered how people talked about and understood traditions before the word and idea of “tradition” became so important in recent decades. I have also wondered why today’s classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asia are usually classed as traditional artists, but ballet dancers are not. Why is that? Both types of dancers have trained themselves in body, mind and feeling—albeit quite differently—and learned to combine their artistic experience and corporeal creativity into sequences of movement that match musical sequences, both individually and with other similarly-trained dancers. Both types of training are fundamental for dancers, and meant to give them greater balance, focus, and energy that will permit them to make coordinated and compelling flows of beautiful, disciplined flesh across a stage.

Until this point, there is little fundamentally different between the two types of dancers. While both types of artists learn from teachers, classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asia see their training as part of a flow of artistic knowledge and embodiment with extremely deep roots. For some of them, these roots extend back to the gods who made, sustain, and can destroy the universe. Few ballet dancers would make such claims. Their training with masters who have inherited a legacy of artistry and power grounded in universal processes gives them a focus that permits their movements to embody vitality while surpassing the movements of everyday life and of ordinary dance training. By mastering the fundamental patterns and situations and musical sequences tied to the rhythms of the universe, the dancers are grounded in forms and opportunities to work in familiar situations and expand upon them to suit new situations. From the start, they participate in a chain of artists that locates them in a grand legacy of universal processes and that play out as the world around them and their performances. This grounding prepares the artists for any situation the world can produce. This understanding of what they have learned again shows some differences from classically-trained ballet dancers.

Beginners in classical dance in mainland Southeast Asia start their training by imitating their master. But after many repetitions and corrections, they know their teachers’ movements and feelings in their bones and muscles and are embodiments of their art. The fluid and spontaneous inner control of these dancers’ bodies does not just derive from the participation in their masters’ knowledge but also gives them access to these cosmic sources their teachers have inherited. This control allows the dancers to focus their attention and to select which

aspects of the dance to effectively convey to the audience the cosmic flow their dance can now access. In so doing, their dance reaches a point of perfection that distinguishes them from dancers elsewhere. The disciplined control of the dancer's body and energy then can flow to other dancers onstage as much as toward the audience. It also joins the cosmic tradition they have learned to the next generation. This is because their dance creates partnerships that unfold outward from those onstage to the world.

Aside from this distinctive form of training and the common roots of their tradition, what else affects artists' performances in Southeast Asia? Their traditions are embedded in two distinctive and contradictory settings. First, most dancers trained in the classical repertoire perform as agents of the state. Second, dancers increasingly participate in a globalized world of dance, art, and culture. These two settings create difficulties and tensions in the dances of the performers.

Firstly, most classically-trained performers engage in dance forms that have been authorized by the state as a main cultural icon of their country. Despite participating in this heritage which has nationalized their artistic tradition, they retain strong ties to their teachers and to their art. Secondly, the artists are also facing the new world of global cultural flows, a world that is very different from that of their masters. The artists have to learn to live with the nationalized and the globalized forms of their arts while remaining true to what their masters taught them. This is a major challenge to both the masters and the artists themselves. They have to work from their grounding in tradition to figure out for themselves how national and how global their arts are as they move through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A major transition that affected all dance and theatre practitioners in Southeast Asia and the institutional basis, focus, and thinking of their art occurred in the middle and later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – unevenly and at varying rates. In this process the foundation and aims of their art shifted from its earlier grounding in royalty, the broader nobility, and temples, to newly created agencies and institutions of national arts and culture embedded in the official government bureaucracy. As a result of these changes, the classical arts came to represent the distinctive cultural features of each country. In Southeast Asia, the arts are quite diverse and practiced differently in local communities, but in the new system, a few artists, most of whom were trained in government-sponsored institutions, have been asked to serve national goals and to represent national standards of beauty. This is despite the fact that individual master-student relationships still structure a more basic level of learning and loyalty.<sup>2</sup>

Equally important for the classical dancers in mainland Southeast Asia, likewise occurring most dramatically since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, is the changing cultural

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<sup>2</sup> The center of court-dance—for Thailand—is masked dance (called *khon*), and it has become the main form that Thailand has wanted to introduce to the world as basic to a distinctive Thai culture. In Cambodia, the government's reestablishment of the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), after the Khmer Rouge era had tried to destroy —nearly successfully—royal traditions, was done with the support of UNESCO. Such efforts helped Cambodia revive its traditional Cambodian arts as the Lakhon Kbac Boran (ancient women's court-dance) theatre, and thirteen other genres of Cambodian traditional dance forms. From an Amrita Performing Arts publication.

landscape beyond their space of training and performance. In this new environment, there is greater emphasis on forms of cultural expression that flow across borders very easily and which require larger production units but little formal training to perform, enjoy, or interpret. This globalized cultural environment is more pervasive and invasive than any known earlier. It has challenged all of the classical arts and artists. Some artists choose to stick closer to what they learned from their teachers and preserve this knowledge for their students and audiences. Other artists seek to learn how to remain firm in their traditions while also moving out from that base and enter into partnerships with other artists and other cultural forms.

Let's look at this situation in more detail.

Masked dance in mainland Southeast Asia—in Thailand<sup>3</sup> and Cambodia<sup>4</sup>—are

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<sup>3</sup> Masked dance in Thailand has become a classical and refined form that was once tied to the royal court but in the last half century has been based in the government run system of Colleges of Dance and Music that exist across Thailand. The forms taught and performed there have incorporated many modern elements such as females performing in women's roles and having only those playing the monkey and giant roles wearing masks and including more dancers onstage (this is influenced by general court dance, which was mainly performed by women, called Lakhon), more singing and use of music to express feeling, and finally performing in theatres rather than in outdoor performances.

<sup>4</sup> In Cambodia, masked dance (called Lakhon Khaol in Khmer) is also a classical form, but still only men perform. The performers wear masks, except for men who play female roles. Traditionally, this form was sponsored by temples and there is still a strong base in local communities, although for Cambodian court

sister arts. They developed from ancient Hindu concepts and practices. Each emerged from an evolving mix of big shadow puppet performances,<sup>5</sup> court ritual and martial arts, and became dance forms performed by rigorously trained humans wearing masks, chiefly for the nobility. As the political situation changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the royal family became less directly involved in politics amid many coups, wars, and changes of regime, masked dance took on its own unique features in each country, including many layers of history and artistry as each country developed along its distinctive path toward becoming a nation-state. While each shares common artistic roots with the other, the historical circumstances and developments of the masked forms have produced two unique types of classical dance, while sharing many parallels and overlaps.

Both types of masked dance use similar modes of training, grounded in the training with particular masters. While individualized to some degree, there is a higher degree of uniform and standardized teaching in both countries now than before. Young students are trained in institutions sponsored by the government.

Thailand can trace its School of Dance and Music to 1935, just three years after the country had abandoned absolute monarchy. But it was only a decade later, in 1945, that the School or College (as its successor is known today) embraced masked dance as part of its curriculum and taught it to

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forms, performance of the Ramayana, use monkeys from Lakhon Khaol troupes.

<sup>5</sup> Thais call this large shadow puppet format Nang Yai while in Khmer it is known as Sbek Thom. Both are used to tell episodes of the Ramayana.

young men. Thereafter, masked dance came to represent the cultural interests of the country as well celebrating the king. In making these shifts, masked dance came to embody the pinnacle of Thai arts for its own citizens as much as for the rest of the world. The main institutions where it was taught created a new format that allowed women performers to perform with males, but only giants and monkeys wore masks over the whole head.

Lakhon Khoal in Cambodia emerged along a more tortuous and difficult path in the years after the reestablishment of the Royal University of Fine Arts. Only recently have masters and young performers been assembled to perform full productions based on the Reamkir (Cambodian version of the Ramayana), with the first outcome being the Battle of Weyreap, performed first in Phnom Penh, then in Bangkok, before going to other venues, including the recently acclaimed performance at the Barbican in London. The new troupe of male masked dance performers in Cambodia also became another male dance genre representing Cambodian arts within and outside Cambodia, and was able to tour the world. This expanded the introduction of Cambodian performances to the world beyond the justly famous Lakhoan Kbec Boran. The new production, first performed in 2004, embraced many local elements from different Cambodian provinces and added some contemporary elements in order to attract and hold the attention of younger audiences. These innovations helped ensure its strong reception among Cambodian audiences who had not seen male masked dance performed in full form for more than two decades. Soon afterward, Bangkok audiences were similarly excited and impressed by the revived form.

Using this background sketch, I now would like to move on to discuss two pilot projects using masked dance artists in these two countries from the last three years.<sup>6</sup> One has been based in Bangkok, Thailand (with a couple of performance trips to Chiangmai) and is rehearsed and regularly performed at the Chulermkrung Royal Theatre and is called Khon.<sup>7</sup> Another is the experimental project called Revitalizing Giants and Monkeys, which was co-produced by the Amrita Performing Arts (based in Phnom Penh) with the support of the Chulalongkorn University Research Unit. The latter project was funded mainly by the Prince Claus Foundation of the Netherlands. By looking more closely at these two projects, we can better see the kinds of partnerships some classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asia are making to ensure that their art survives. They show how Cambodian and Thai artists' partnerships combine their classical artistic training and contemporary interests to create performances that seek to engage today's diverse dance audiences in different ways.

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<sup>6</sup> Supported by Chulalongkorn University and the Thai Foreign Ministry, I was the co-producer of the performance of "The Battle of Weyreap" at Chulalongkorn University in June 2004, and helped arrange a symposium and workshop, which allowed many Thais to see Cambodian performance and learn of their revived arts for the first time.

<sup>7</sup> The Khon project began through the initiative of Knit Kounavudh and Atcharawan Jearathanaporn. In its first year it was funded by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Chulermkrung Foundation of the Crown Property Bureau, and was meant to be part of the celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol's accession to the throne. It was produced by the Silpsiri Khonlakhon Company, which I was once part of, but from which I have very recently withdrawn.

As a participant in these two pilot projects, I first noticed that many young dancers trained in Thailand's standard curriculum at the College of Dance learn to see their training as primarily meant to protect the nation's cultural heritage, especially by preserving its formal aspects. In mastering the dance patterns and forms precisely and perfectly, they believe that they are learning to perform the art at its best. But they also have to develop other types of knowledge in order to be able to fully participate in and benefit from the complex and changing world and similarly complex and changing audiences—and, most importantly, the changes in themselves.

At this time in our world, traditional performance is often an icon of exotic identity for both performers and audiences. Both sides feel safe and sure if they can comfortably fit one or another traditional performance into a standardized box. They become passports that tell them who they are and what they are seeing. They—both artists and audiences—use this preserved performance icon to identify a package of traditional dance to signal who one is, where one comes from, and what one's roots are—without knowing and supporting it. It is a kind of symbol that the post-modern person needs to identify his/herself. But does the traditional artist or the one who is learning the craft or practicing this art—a person who shares our time—have any other duty besides preserving the old by repeating the art forms they have mastered? Besides being preserved, can tradition point to another, more vital, type of knowledge tradition that permits one to partner and learn from other arts and cultural forms? This might not be much of a question any more for many western artists, but many traditionally trained artists in Southeast

Asia are challenged by it since many have learned that their primary duty is protect and preserve the old traditions.

For them, the concept of “new” traditional dance is impossible. This view means that there is space for younger creative artists to develop their approach to using their training in new and provisional ways from within their classical forms. This is an unhealthy development in traditional arts, one which could prove fatal in the long run. It is important to recall that preserving and revitalizing traditions need not be opposed to one another. Both want to ensure that the traditions live on as fully and powerfully as possible. Can we make the traditional arts into living arts? What kinds of paths can we take to let the artists do this? How long would it take to do so?

Can tradition be the basis for artists to create something new? This may no longer be an important question for many Western artists, but it is something that traditional Southeast Asian artists have begun asking. Having learned their art with the aim of protecting and preserving its traditions, today's performers inherited it from their teachers with support from the state in a world of cultural flows where all is threatened. Despite these difficult circumstances, many artists want to use their training and talent to work out from the limits placed upon them by their training and tradition. Even though in their day to day lives and even in their art they have more chances to interact with western music or dance, do they only see it as an alternative approach to be juxtaposed to their own art, and perhaps one not quite as good? Traditional artists in mainland Southeast Asia are in the process of figuring out new ways to use tradition to create new work of their own. There are many questions from administrators,

conservative audiences, etc. since they feel insecure about the results, which appears to destroy traditions and cultural identity. But for the artists who live and best understand the art forms they embody, are there other paths and other ways to be responsible and creative toward their art? Do they enjoy finding the best way to create new pieces within a process of time? The artists might find another tradition in themselves that moves better with the time and the changing audiences they face everyday.

On stages across South and Southeast Asia, humans, demons, animals, and gods regularly interact onstage in traditional performances. Relationships and actions among the characters from these different categories form the core of the main classical and popular stage repertoire in Cambodia and Thailand. Among the actions characters can perform is transformation, which permits characters to shift from one category to another and to assume the forms of those different characters.

Besides changing the place where classical dance is done, and recognizing that the audiences that come to experience the dance also different from what they once were, there is also a need to change what the dancers do to suit the new space and to move more diverse audiences. The production company needs to be reworked to reach those ends. There are many ways to make these changes, but here I would only like to consider two of them.

1. By changing the venue and the external conditions of the performance. This allows traditional artists to learn to solve problems and involve themselves more intensively with modern theatre artists and management teams to present their

classical art. This will be explored below in a closer look at the pilot project of young people in masked dance at the Chalerkrong Royal Theatre. It aimed to create new traditional performances that were compressed, more fast-paced, using new lighting and old-style costumes and sets. They also partnered with young performers, older masters, and contemporary artists, as well as with audiences of connoisseurs, foreigners, and young people.

2. By expanding the foundations of the artists to include those with similar training but also different experiences in living in the globalized cultural world. This will be explored below in the Cambodian-Thai artists working on the experimental “Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants” project. Its aim was to establish partnerships across genres and across national boundaries to find new ways to structure, arrange and stage traditional dances, putting classical training in a new contemporary setting.

### **The *Khon* (Masked Dance) Project at the Chalerkrong Royal Theatre**



(Phra Chakra Avatar @Sala Chalerkrong 2005-2006)

Since the end of the Second World War, masked dance in Thailand has been part of a state-run project that aimed to restore the classical arts that had once been sponsored by the royal court, but to do so as the foundation of a unified – and more or less uniform – Thai culture operating above the various local traditions across Thailand. At first, the precise relationships among the various interlinked arts included in this effort were not clear, since they were part of a new government bureaucratic institution. Previously, in the decade or so after the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, the Thai government did little to promote the art forms once sponsored by the royal family and its foundations, fearing that they could provide a base for the continued support of the deposed royal family and thus of a possible restoration of absolute monarchy. Rather than focus on the classical arts and culture and their royal connections, the early Thai governments pursued a strong course of becoming modern by installing policies, practices, and priorities derived from Western countries. These modernizing initiatives did not include a strong place for indigenous cultural forms but instead stressed forms that were both modern and Western as markers of participating in world civilization.<sup>8</sup> Classical dance forms,

including masked dance and classical dance, only slowly found a place in the emerging modern democratic Thai system, and only slowly regained their roles in modern society as the common cultural foundation of a unified Thailand.

Today the main government institutions charged with teaching and performing these standardized cultural forms in Thailand are a dozen Colleges of Dance and Music. Despite the number of schools and hundreds of students in them at any time, Thai classical dance and music is facing some significant problems. One of the main problems is that only a small fraction of those trained in classical music and dance at these schools are able to enter society and earn a living using the artistic training they received there.

Part of the reason for the shrinking set of venues for classically-trained artists is that Thailand's traditional arts have been frozen in their classical forms since the curriculum and repertoire were fixed a half century ago. Since the 1950s, there have been few innovations that have led to creating new performances since it is accepted within this bureaucratic institution that the fixed forms they possess are perfect in their refined beauty and do not require change. Since the numbers of practitioners have been increasing with fewer venues for the trainees to demonstrate their art, they go into the job market to become teachers or work in tourism, and only 10 % are able to

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<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister Luang Phibusongkram (in power 1938-1944) established a new plan for arts and culture in Thailand as part of his plan to create a “new nation” (*sang chart*). He relocated the Department of Arts and Music, which once served the royal court, under the new Ministry of Education. He saw all arts and culture to have the goal of serving education. During the time he was in power, many new historical plays were written and performed. The modern style plays that were written to serve the new government were strongly nationalist and very romantic. The performances were based on literature in school curricula and

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publicized new “democratic” political beliefs. These changes were meant to strengthen the political status of ordinary people. The style of musical plays included spoken plays and some singing encouraged by the state. (Rutnin 1999)

make a living as classical artists while they were trained for in the Fine Arts Department, or they become classical dance teachers in the dozen or so Colleges of Dance and Music.

A few new entertainment venues for traditional artists have been built to use this surplus of dancers, a limited repertoire of very short pieces performed in restaurants while guests are eating.<sup>9</sup> Another new venue for classical dance was reestablished at the Chalerkrung Royal Theatre. The latter venue emerged from a perceived need to provide a new space for classical performances, ones that were better geared to the demands of tourists and Thais alike, both of whom lacked the background knowledge and time to fully appreciate the artistry of a complete classical masked dance performance. Recognizing this situation, a production team presented sponsors with a project that would allow audiences in Bangkok to see a new version of classical dance that both Thais and foreigners could enjoy in a theatre setting.

Creating a masked dance performance piece to fill this need required a partnership between traditional and contemporary artists in Thailand. Starting in late 2005 and running over eighteen months, the masked dance project at Chalerkrung partnered traditional and contemporary artists, while adding a new management team. Besides entertaining the audience, the production also sought to

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<sup>9</sup> There were three main traditional entertainment venues in Bangkok: the Joe Louis Theatre (a 500-seat theatre which does new traditional puppet performances), the Siam Niramit (a huge cultural show representing different parts of Thai culture performed in a huge 2000-seat hall) and the Chalerkrung Royal Theatre (a 500-seat theatre for masked dance performances).

glorify and celebrate His Majesty King Rama IX (Bhumibhol) in the 60<sup>th</sup> year of his reign.<sup>10</sup> In light of this occasion, the choice of production was Phra Chakra Avatar, which dealt with the incarnation of the God Vishnu as Rama and the path Rama took toward completing the major charge for his incarnation, namely, to destroy the evil demon Ravana.

In seeking to show the whole story of Rama and how he saved the world from the evil giant Ravana, the production team decided on a new format, one which would tell the whole story in seventy minutes. For this to happen, the plot and scenes and sequence for telling the story had to change. By selecting only a handful of episodes and by speeding up the tempo of the music and the dance, there was more of a contemporary feel than in most classical performance treatments. The new lighting designs and use of space were also contemporary. The production company used a non-profit organization approach run by a management team.

In altering a well-known traditional form and organization based on the Thai Ramayana, the audience could view the full core of the story cycle in about an hour. Both contemporary artists and traditional performers saw this as a challenge, but they collaborated to enable the piece to fit well with the expectations of contemporary audiences. Who were the anticipated audience? They were chiefly young Thai students and tourists who wanted to spend an evening at a classical performance near Chinatown. The mural paintings they saw on the walls of the

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<sup>10</sup> A second production, based on episodes telling the story of Hanuman, began running later in 2006.

Emerald Buddha Temple would come to life for them onstage at the Chalermkrung Theatre.

At the core of the project were Thai classical artists. Piroj Thongkhamasuk was hired as playwright and director, and a handful of key masters from the College of Dance and Music were taken on as consultants.<sup>11</sup> Shaping this core in new ways was a handful of contemporary theatre people who served as the artistic directors and consultants in music, choreography, and design. The latter sought to find ways to use the small space effectively, how to light the dance production to emphasize greater depth and to create new feelings when audiences watch the production.

There are no sure paths for artists to follow in developing quality work in new spaces with new funding. They could only try to challenge themselves to help artists explore ways to create and solve problems in creating dance and performing arts to suit the taste contemporary audiences.

The artistic directors had all worked in modern theatre. They were aided by modern stage designers in creating a stage that could best use the available area for

dance.<sup>12</sup> The lighting was designed to create a shifting set of moods that could best help the glittering costumes gleam and shine and be more beautiful than typical lighting that emphasized brilliance and flare.

Newly designed costumes and masks, along with the many new props like chariots, were created based on old patterns seen in temple mural paintings and differed from the designs familiar to Thai classical artists for the last half century. They were done based on new embroidery from old pictures of the costumes<sup>13</sup>. The chariots were redesigned to suit Rama, the hero and god, and Ravana, the great demonic villain.

A management team was hired to help run the stage every weekend. They also ran the auditions and oversaw the rehearsals that made the performance crisp, clean and powerful every week.

The dancers were mostly recent young graduates from the College of Music and Dance, but also included some current students at the college. The new venue became a space for training and provided an opportunity for young dancer to participate in real performances in front of the audience.

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<sup>11</sup> As with most classical performances, the director of this project worked with four other masters to shape his dance and assemble the piece. These four masters helped in the choreography and training of the young dancers, helping them work with the timing and sequencing of the performance. The four masters were: Khru Paitoon Khemkhaeng (the master for the male leads), Khru Julachart Arunyanark (for the Giant roles), Khru Viroj Yusawadi (for Monkey roles), and Khru Bunnark Tattranonda (for female roles).

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<sup>12</sup> The Modern artists involved in the project included Executive Producer Knit Kounavudh, Producer and Artistic Director Pornrat Damrhung and Choreographer/Artistic Director Pichet Klunchun, set and design consultant Prof. Allan Stichbury, University of Victoria, and Music Consultants Sinnapa Sarasas and Sanchai Ua-Silpa

<sup>13</sup> Costumes were designed and made by Khun Supornthip Supornkul.

The script, and the choreography, and music and dance sequencing, were designed to better fit with the expectations of modern audiences. A team of consultants made sure that the rhythm would attract the new audience. The performance concentrated on telling the whole story of the main character—Rama—his full life and his main adventures from beginning to end. Using big shadow puppets and stressing the note of the narrators and sacred music to keep the show moving smoothly contributed to making the pace of the story move quicker than in the traditional form, as those responsible for the production aimed to do the whole thing in about an hour.

This need for an outside space for classical dance for foreign guests to come and appreciate high-quality culture gave the playwright, directors and the consulting team the opportunity to develop a performance that used a traditional story and dance but in a new way to create a performance that gave young dancers an opportunity to dance and earn their living from what they had been trained to do. The different design of the space and the ways that sets and lighting were used helped to introduce a new approach to staging classical performances for both the artists and audiences. It reminds us that there are different ways to revive classical dance—including different design approaches and new ways to tell the story, rather than replicating traditional forms with few changes.

Although heavily based in traditional techniques and performers, this project, as I saw it, was an experimental one that sought to give traditional performance a chance to partner with contemporary artists and management in order to create a space for classical dance that would be a small step toward a more difficult and

profound experiment with traditional performers. This project challenged both partners—the traditional and the modern artists—to do something new.

This example suggests just a few ways that dance traditions deeply grounded in classical priorities can still adopt new features to better match the contemporary world. While still preliminary and unfinished, this project suggests that new ways of organizing this type of dance are needed to give greater space and time for artists to adjust and organize their thoughts into a system that can convey more complex and subtle meanings to the changing audience pool for the classical arts. So far governments in Southeast Asia have not generally recognized the importance of supporting these new efforts. Instead, private foundations and organizations have tended to fund the newer experiments.

This experimental process has produced both good and bad results. The artists also need to learn and experience different types of reactions from audiences, and to adjust their traditional training and art so that it remains a powerful, dynamic, and exciting part of the lives and the lives of their diverse contemporary audiences. For them to remain relevant, their arts need to be genuinely revitalized so that they can ensure a continued place for their dance in the lives of their audiences. No traditional art can remain vital without pushing beyond the confines assigned to it—that is without going outside the frame that has both sheltered it within preserved forms and kept it from the interesting world it is part of. Toward that end, I consider another example of reviving the traditional arts for today's world, one in which creating new partnerships grounded in cognate traditions are created across national boundaries.

## **The “Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants” Project in Cambodia and Singapore**



(Revitalizing monkeys and Giants. Courtesy from Fred Frumberg, Amarita Performing Arts)

The smaller and more experimental “Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants” project began from a different starting point and moved in a different direction than did the Khon project discussed above. Funded by the Dutch Prince Claus Foundation and the Research Fund of Chulalongkorn University and organized by Amrita, this revitalizing pilot project created new partnerships among artists from two countries who shared common roots, but worked from these roots in a different kind of contemporary performance space which led in a very different direction from the approach used at the Chalerkrung Royal Theatre. It gave artists from different countries who shared similar training and sensibilities a space to work together with their art and to push it toward new ends. They brought a lot of experience and basic common understanding to create a dance based in that common foundation. The project sought to use traditional resources mastered by young artists who wanted to explore a new direction for them to express

their feelings and their art to today’s audiences.

This collaborative revitalizing project between Thai and Cambodian artists<sup>14</sup> sought to bring the two groups of artists together to create a contemporary piece grounded in the traditional arts. The Thai contemporary artists wanted to work with similarly-trained artists to learn their approaches to performance and to see if some of the approach they had developed in various earlier projects could be useful. The Thai team consisted of four arts practitioners who had worked together off and on for a decade creating dance and musical performances based in traditional sources. They worked mostly on small university projects and never had much of a chance to work with a group of committed traditional artists from the Thai Department of Fine Arts.

The Cambodian musicians and male masked dancers, most of whom were younger, had been pre-selected for their desire to search for new ways to use their artistic training and to learn to express themselves from within.

Due to the limitation of time (just a few weeks), the work and its processes began from the basic knowledge of the Cambodian artists shared by the Thai artists. Both sides started from shared fundamentals that they knew by heart. In particular, they selected an excerpt from a traditional masked dance performance as the experimental starting point for the project. It was a scene that involved both fighting and sorrow from the Battle of Weyreap, which the Cambodian artists had

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<sup>14</sup> Thai artists involved: Sinnapa Sarassas , Pichet Klunchu, Sanchai Ua-Silpa.

been working on. At the core of this tale is a decision that a character must make about where his loyalties lie. It is reflected in a decision he must make about whether he should kill his biological father or kill his adoptive father. The familiarity of this story to everyone permitted all to break down the scene to its fundamentals and to open up each piece of music, each character, and each action for more interpretation, first in the music and then in the dance. For both Thais and Cambodians, once the main plot had been dismantled, each element could be analyzed for its inner qualities and for what the performers felt about those elements. Through this focus, the performers were able to emphasize the inner feeling of the singers and then merge music and performance with the characters at the end of the process.

To help the artists from both countries start from the same ground they started with the traditional music that conveyed both bellicose and sorrowful feelings. This became the basic ground on which to start the project. The two feelings were similar in terms of their function—and were well-known in both countries—one the Cherd jeup, was used for fighting, but the other, which conveyed sorrow, was expressed differently by the Cambodians. This was the music that allowed the Cambodian artists to create a new interpretation from their traditional piece.

Music played a key role in this workshop since the musicians altered how music would work in the performance, making it very different from traditional performances. They sought to find a new voice, and a new interpretation that would express more of the artists' feelings rather than a fixed function. The music set a new atmosphere for the dancers. While traditional instruments were used, they

were given a different pacing and a different interpretation. This forced the dancers to focus on their expressiveness and to adjust their movements to focus more on the music and its feeling.

Following this lead, the choreographer chose to ask the dancers to focus on the inner-directed interpretations of the scene. He stressed the confusion and reluctance of the main character (about whether to serve his biological or his legal father). He wanted to dismantle the traditional story and reassemble it so it would move in a new and unfixed direction. The slower musical pace permitted the dancers to work in this direction and helped the characters create a new balance and energy flow. It inspired new movements within the framework of traditional dance.

This project asked the classical dancers to perform without their masks and beautiful costumes. By being robbed of this cover, the performers were intensely aware of thing fully visible to the audience. The dynamic interactions among dancers, musicians, and their audiences helped to create a new set of partnerships in this project from the beginning. The process was most important in this project. The performers became more deeply aware of their bodies, their feelings, and the role of music in creating their own expressiveness out of patterns that had become second nature to them.

Does this process help the artists know themselves and the role of their art in contemporary society better? Could this workshop help everyone to understand the use of their body—their strength—their capability better? Could they become better artists and make more confident choices in how to explore the terrifying process of expressing their feelings?

Could it be a first step toward making another type of creativity in the traditional arts? These are the questions raised for me by this process, one of many that should be encouraged for classically-trained artists.

To make the artists proud of their art and their traditions, we need to give classically-trained artists the space, time and opportunity to develop their arts, give them a chance to learn about the changing world and their place, including the usefulness of modern management and diverse global audiences. The dancers and their teachers have to learn how to create arts that will be able to fit well in the present time and circumstances. The training and learning they do will help prepare them to deal with a new style of management and an ability to work with self-respect and discipline, learning teamwork which remaining honest to their modern audiences. Both old and young artists must adjust and create new goals in order to make the best for the production possible. The artists must also learn better how to give themselves an opportunity to learn and try to express and work creatively with others.

Audiences, colleagues, scholars, and administrators will have many questions about what the artists are doing. Many outsiders will feel unsure about this experimental process, and wonder if this new work comes about by neglecting—if not destroying—traditions. These are important and difficult questions. But for the artists who live and best understand the art forms they embody, are these other paths and other ways responsible to and creative toward their art? Do they enjoy exploring the best way to create new pieces within a process of time? The artists might find another tradition in themselves

that moves better with the times and the changing audiences they face everyday.

I see these two projects as parts of a longer-term process, still in its initial stages, that has been emerging across mainland Southeast Asia in recent years, where traditional artists are preparing themselves for the changing circumstances and conditions they are part of. This process includes changes not only in the audiences and their new expectations, as well as the new knowledge of the artists.

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The partnerships established between contemporary and traditional artists in the *Khon* project at Chalerkrung Theater and between Cambodian and Thai artists on the Revitalizing project have continued and expanded. Yet they are just two examples and still early in their development. By exploring these two projects, I hope to suggest that they are but two ways for classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asian to adapt and prepare themselves to work in the rapidly changing local and global circumstances they are part of. Although many of them are very young, the artists have already lived through and been challenged by the globalized world, a world in which they are as much a part of the world as of traditional arts. In doing so they are better able to establish new cultural niches for their arts in today's changing society. They give living shape and energy to Southeast Asia's classical arts. Rather than simply staging these standardized cultural forms by striving for perfect repetition as their teachers taught them, the new performers look to add something new for today's living audiences.

## **Conclusion**

Artists thrive through the partnerships they make. In learning their art, classically-trained dancers in mainland Southeast Asia make strong partnerships with their teachers and the deep-rooted traditions they embody, but they then have to learn to live in the contemporary world with their traditions. This requires that they make new types of partnerships, ones that are quite different from those for which they were trained. Many of these artists certainly enjoy performing the art forms that they have spent their lives perfecting, but to engage their audiences in meaningful ways and to keep their art alive, they need to be able to go beyond their artistic training into new areas. It is important that they feel respect for their art, and are attuned both to their audiences—who are modern people with a much wider array of cultural choices than previously—and also attuned to their own lives outside of their performance.

For non-practitioners to admire and judge only the art forms that they know best and that are most familiar to them is selfish and unfair to the artists. It prevents the artists from creating new partnerships with the contemporary world—including its lively arts and audiences—and of ensuring their art remains vital for the world.

Replicating wonderful past performance styles can and should have an important place in the repertoire of classically-trained artists, but these artists should also be given opportunities—and encouraged—to explore new dimensions of their classical arts or to try new forms of artistic expression with their talents, even if these experiments are not familiar to their audiences. Younger artists in mainland Southeast Asia are often happy to have

chances to use their training and to make a living doing so, but many also want to move beyond the art forms they have learned from their masters, who themselves had mastered what they learned from their teachers, to work with their art in new ways and to show others the new possibilities of their enhanced art.

What are the new sources and arenas for classically-trained artists in mainland Southeast Asia? New venues for reaching out to the world are opening up for them in their own countries. Another new set of chances comes to them through globalization. Partnering with neighbors and with those from further away permits the artists to travel, to learn, and to interact with other dancers and peoples. This helps them to better realize the distinctive features of their own arts and helps them to discover how their arts can be expanded. The dancers can then start new movements and trends, both to strengthen the vitality of their own traditions and to see how these traditions can be enriched. Younger artists especially want to exchange and open up their minds in ongoing dialogues with other artists.

When classically-trained artists have a firm grounding in their practice, they know the value of those arts as full participants in the traditions they inherited. Despite this, however, they know that there are many other artistic ways and they want to work with some of these new ways using the skills and talents that they have built up through years of training. They know that in our time it is important for their art to remain vital, and can see that learning more than one approach to using their training and learning from others will help their art and their tradition to survive. By working with other artists and familiarizing themselves with other

traditions, the artists become more aware of their own strengths and how to work outward from their foundation into other spaces. They can expand their corporeally-grounded artistic lives and forge new alliances to help them become more capable partners in the increasingly globalized world artists live in, yet without neglecting their unique strengths and talents and while enhancing the vitality of their own arts.

In learning to use their bodies beyond what they first mastered with their teachers, the artists are better able to understand the inner coordination of their muscles, thoughts and feelings that makes any dance unique. They can improve their ability to communicate clearly, remain balanced in their use of the arts, and become better judges of how to refine and expand their artistic repertoire. Traditional modes of training and performing in mainland Southeast Asia (and elsewhere, of course) focus on extensive training of artists' bodies and minds by modeling themselves on the masters who have already inherited the tradition. Young Dancers learn to obey and embody without asking and without expecting reasons. Once that has been done, artists can learn to survive and to solve problems when they interact with other artists or dance to different music in new formats and venues, and before new audiences. This kind of adjustment in the arts helps artists to be more aware of themselves and teaches them how to respond to new situations, both with new reactions and with standard moves done in new circumstances. Both give a new feeling to the artists' minds and the bodies. They are great opportunities to live their art in a new way, seeing it from a new angle and taking their art in a new direction.

Globalization allows dancers from many backgrounds to interact with people who are somehow similar to them—as dancers—but different in how dancers approach problems and performances. This helps them to see the same things in totally fresh ways and to learn new things—new techniques and unfamiliar ways of thinking, feeling, and performing.

Creating new partnerships like those sketched above gives artists new chances to experience and work toward making new conditions for their art. It challenges them to face and solve their problems by both fighting within themselves and their automatic “second nature” reactions and to question their arts and its place in society. Audiences are important partners with the artists, and by seeing traditional artists in new settings, they are able to see not just different things than they know by heart, are familiar with, or expect, but also to see things differently. In this way, artists and audiences alike benefit from the new performance spaces carved out by traditionally-trained artists. Both should have new opportunities to try and experience the arts in new ways. By thus exploring new spaces, both groups can shape new alliances based on trust and interaction, learning other approaches and methods of interpretation. This will help them to gain a better understanding of the traditional arts and the new directions they can move in the future.

Partnerships between the traditional and contemporary arts should be encouraged with a bold and sincere respect to agents and representatives of each side. Mutual respect and pride of the arts genres should be encouraged. By encouraging mutual trust, both sides will be able to learn from each other.

From an institutional perspective, other partnering organizations would include schools and corporations. In recent decades, traditional artists have been supported by two main sets of organizations: governments and foundations. Although done at different times and to different degrees, artists in both Cambodia and Thailand faced a period of government-led destruction or neglect of their traditional arts. Although the near extinction of classical artists under the Pol Pot regime was both later and much less severe than Phibun-era attempts to reduce royalist implications of the traditional arts, both marked a transitory phase that has more recently been replaced by deliberate—and variable—government attempts to support the traditional arts as part of efforts to creating national identities. Although done differently in Thailand and Cambodia, governments in both countries have mainly focused on preserving the traditional arts. Secondarily, efforts at promoting the traditional arts have also been supported by private organizations and foundations. Since they are less directly involved in promoting a sense of national identity, they have generally been more open to incorporating traditional artists into performances in new ways and to putting their arts into venues for traditional artists trying to put new spins on their art forms. Both sets of sponsors need to understand the arts—that they also need new venues—places to perform. They should also challenge them to create work that requires their creativity and knowledge. The new venues and the contemporary audience should encourage and challenge artists to work and collaborate with a new system and learn to work in new circumstances.

Arts management should focus on efforts to provide artists new venues for their performances and to perform both new

and old pieces in ways that challenge their mastery of the arts and that help audiences to develop a better understanding of the arts and embrace the arts as vital corporate of the community and society.

If successful, these efforts will bring freshness to dancers, and liveliness in their hearts, along with a deeper knowledge of their bodies and the creativity in their minds. These new projects will help traditional artists to be able to use their arts as tools to create new pieces that are based on the traditions they have mastered and to come up with new traditional pieces able to catch contemporary audience—presenting new meanings and communicating with audiences in terms of presentations that are relevant to them and possess a type of beauty that they can appreciate, understand and respect.

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