



Southeast Asian 'Living Theatre'

Report >
Southeast Asia

10-14 November
2003
Bangkok, Thailand

Balinese *topeng*
performed by I
Wayan Dibia

International arts promoters and not a few scholars are heavily invested in the dichotomy between the traditional and the contemporary. Books, exhibits, and performances on 'sacred/classical/indigenous' art and 'innovative/cutting-edge/postmodern' art are marketed to consumers around the world each year. Such labels, however, poorly fit much recent Southeast Asian theatre, which muddles received categories.

By Matthew Isaac Cohen

The new and the old, the foreign and the local, the urban and the rural: all of these apparent dichotomies have long existed in dynamic relation in Southeast Asian theatre. Today's living theatre is traditional and contemporary, a restoration of the past and alive to the present, locally rooted and globally aware. In the course of two days of academic presentations on theatre and dance flowing into three days of practical workshops on contemporary dance, Burmese marionette puppetry, theatre games, Balinese traditional dance, object animation, tableaux, and Thai traditional dance-theatre and rod puppetry, the SPAFA seminar-workshop on

Southeast Asian Performing Arts vividly brought these complexities to life.

Tradition-based contemporary performance

Nicanor G. Tiongson, in his presentation, described a recent revival of *sarswela*. A musical theatre popular in the Philippines at the turn of the century, traditional *sarswela* was a cheery cultural defence of class privilege, produced by the middle class for a predominately lower-class audience. The award-winning entry in the 1998 Centennial Literary Prize *sarswela* competition, Mario O'Hara's *Palasyo ni Valentin* (The Palace of Valentin), is a subversion of the ideology and form of traditional *sarswela*. *Palasyo* is a memo-

ry play set in a decrepit theatre in the city of Intramuros. Brutality, murder, suicide, deception, and revolution are explored through the ghostly recollection of pre-independence *sarswela* theatre. *Palasyo* rejects a linear plot, stereotypically 'good' and 'bad' characters, and pat moral messages in order to explore class conflict and the vicissitudes of history and character. No easy pleasure or reassurance is to be had. *Palasyo* uses songs, *sarswela* acting, and even excerpts of *sarswela* plays. But is *Palasyo sarswela*?

In her presentation on Thai comic performance, Wankwan Polachan described the Talok Café, and then led participants to this well-known feature of Bangkok nightlife. The Talok Café is a comedy and

Students and professional actor-dancers in a Khon workshop

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music club, as well as an eating establishment, frequented primarily by migrants from rural Thailand. Comedy troupes presenting comic skits and sketches with an emphasis on physical humour and bawdy word play alternate with attractive male and female singers performing Thai pop music. The atmosphere is chic and urban, but the slapstick humour and conventions of audience-performer interaction are traditional and rural. Guests socialize with the singers, and present garlands of money as tokens of appreciation. Some of the comedy troupe leaders are long time Bangkok residents and have become nationally recognized stars through their Talok Café performances, television appearances, and VCDs but their humour remains rooted in rural ways. The comedians, however, are now faced with a dilemma. They are running out of jokes and losing touch with recent rural developments. Some performers are educating themselves on rural migrants' urban concerns to better relate to their audiences. The Café now stands at a crossroads. Will it transform into an urban venue? Or will it disappear?

The internationally famous Singaporean theatre maker Ong Keng Sen presented an overview of his intercultural productions and Flying Circus workshops. Ong's work shows that Southeast Asian practitioners best known for their groundbreaking work are often vitally concerned with the traditional arts of their countries of origin, and of other countries in the region. One of his recent projects on Cambodian court dance and drama resulted in the reconstruction of core repertory items, as well as a powerful piece of reminiscence theatre performed by and devised together with former court dancers: *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2001). The Flying Circus Project was conceived in the same spirit. The 'antithesis of the museum', Flying Circus brings together traditional and non-traditional artists into a space for exchange and exploration, leading to moments both silly and sublime. Ong Keng Sen has been criticized by scholars for his 'Made in Singapore' cultural imperialism and entrepreneurship – criticism he has cannily incorporated into his work. Should Ong

Ken Sen be seen within a history of Singaporean Chinese cultural brokers and impresarios, or does his work demand appreciation according to non-local standards?

Zulkifli Bin Mohamad presented a possible solution to some classificatory problems in his discussion of the political economy of Malaysian performance. A new mode of practice is emerging in Southeast Asia, which Zulkifli calls 'tradition-based contemporary dance and theatre'. Artists from both traditional and modern backgrounds are reinterpreting time-honoured disciplines as the basis for new performances, accessible to non-traditional audiences in national and international venues. Tradition is not merely appropriated by these practitioners, but is transformed in the process. Traditional and new audiences equally appreciate many of these artists. Some are as adept in performing folksy comic turns as in discoursing on critical theory. Tradition-based contemporary performance is a particularly critical cultural intervention in Malaysia, where government and religious authorities have colluded to end old patterns of sponsorship for *wayang kulit*, social dance, and ritual drama.

Border crossings

A number of papers and presentations explored the historical and contemporary dimensions of Southeast Asia as a lively crossroads where global artistic practices inter-articulate in exciting and often surprising ways. Southeast Asia's shadow puppet theatres have long ignored what Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof called 'the often artificial boundaries between nations', with performers and puppets travelling overseas for economic, religious, and political ends. As I discussed in my own paper, popular theatre in the Indonesian archipelago has seen the active participation of artists from India, China, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and many other countries for hundreds of years. Singapore's Chinese Opera Institute, under Chua Soo Pong's direction, not only teaches and performs staples of the Teochew operatic repertoire; it has also reinterpreted 'The Golden Deer' episode

of the Ramayana as bilingual Chinese opera. As Pawit Mahasarinand demonstrated, twentieth-century European and American spoken drama in Thai translation has provided a mode for exploring subjects customarily considered taboo in Thai society.

Many issues brought up at the seminar-workshop demand further exploration, including the reinvention of tradition, the politics and aesthetics of Southeast Asian intercultural theatre, copyright and other legal issues involved in the consumption of artistic property across national borders. Virtual and real routes connect the theatres of insular and mainland Southeast Asia. Some are new, others old. The theatre of Southeast Asia will continue

to live as long as it flows across borders, representing the past and imagining the future. <

Dr Matthew Isaac Cohen is a lecturer in theatre studies at the University of Glasgow, where he teaches anthropology of theatre, performance studies, puppet theory, and Indonesian theatre. He was an IIAS fellow in the research programme 'Performing Arts of Asia: Tradition and Innovation' in 1998-2000. He is currently completing a book on the Komedi Stambol and has written extensively on wayang kulit and other forms of Indonesian theatre. He is also a practicing dhalang and convenes the Glasgow performance ensemble Gamelan Naga Mas (www.nagamas.co.uk). M.Cohen@tfs.arts.gla.ac.uk

Tradition-based contemporary dance demonstrated by Zulkifli Bin Mohamad

What is SPAFA?

The Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) was founded in 1978 under the aegis of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and is hosted by the Government of Thailand. Its mandate is to 'promote professional competence, awareness, and preservation of cultural heritage' in ASEAN member states. Its activities over the past 25 years have included training courses in methods and techniques of archaeology, cultural administration, library science, and arts documentation; seminars on tourism, archaeology, and the theatre; and practical workshops in the arts. The organization is active in exchange programmes and consultancy, and has carried out field research on Southeast Asian ethnic music, epigraphy, and arts education. The publication wing puts out a journal and books on archaeology and the arts.

www.seameo-spafa.org



Information >

The seminar and workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts, organized by the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) and Bangkok University, brought together Southeast Asian academics and practitioners of drama, dance, and puppetry, and Thai theatre professionals, young and old, to discuss, act out, and evaluate issues engaging theatre in Southeast Asia today. Publication of the proceedings of the seminar in both English and Thai is anticipated.