

PERFORMANCES BY "NATIONAL LIVING TREASURES" AT THE SIAM SOCIETY

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In order to give Members some idea of the performance skills of those artists who have, in recent years, been designated "National Living Treasures" by the National Culture Commission of Thailand, the Siam Society sponsored performances by five groups the leaders of which have all been thus designated in recent years. These performances were presented in cooperation with the Muang Thai Life Assurance Co., Ltd. and Studio 10, the former covering the major portion of the financial costs involved and the latter assisting with food and accommodation in addition to making video recordings of all performances. With one exception the performances were presented first in the garden of the Society's Kamthieng House. Muang Thai Life Assurance also organised Saturday daytime performances, free of charge to the public, in the 300-seat auditorium at their Head Office. This endeavour was blessed with success as the Saturday audiences usually filled the auditorium.

Nang Yai

The Nang Yai (Giant Shadow Puppets) troupe of Wat Khanon, Ratburi, was the first to be presented, on 23rd February 1990. This group, which was for many years the most professional of the very few survivors of an earlier period, fell upon evil times after the death of a previous abbot more than ten years ago, but in recent years they have made a comeback and have gained much official support for their endeavour to keep the old tradition alive in their village, so much so that they are now hopeful of being granted a budget by the government to cut out 100 new figures to replace the more than a century old ones with which they still have to make do despite very severe signs of wear and tear.

The show opened with the usual formalities including the *Wai Khru* ceremonies during which the troupe invoke the blessings of Phra Isuan (Siva), Rusi (Hermit) and Phra Narai (Phra Ram/Vishnu), after which it was the turn of the Ling Hua Kham (Episode of the Evening Monkeys) in which the black and white monkeys fight on three occasions at the end of which

they are summoned before the Rusi, who admonishes them and, in particular, gives the black monkey a lecture on good behaviour. By tradition the white monkey always wins.

After these proceedings, with introductions, taking perhaps an hour, the programme proper was allowed to begin—The Presentation of the Ring—in which Hanuman, accompanied by Ongkot and Chompooparn, is despatched to Totsagan's palace in Lanka to spy out the land and to carry Phra Ram's ring, and his messages of hope, to the captive Nang Sida. However, the journey through the forest, despite some fine horses, was tortuous, and numerous obstacles had to be overcome on the way. There was the man-eating giant, Paklan, banished to guard the Bok Koranee lake by an offended Phra Siva, there to stay until rescued from the god's curse by the representative of Phra Ram. Further on in the forest lay a deserted city and palace inhabited only by a maiden who had performed some illicit matchmaking and had also been summarily banished from Heaven by Phra Siva. This was the unfortunate Busmalee. The antidote to her banishment required that she be made love to by an officer connected with Phra



Nang Yai (Giant Shadow Puppets) as presented at The Siam Society by the Wat Khanon troupe of Ratburi.

Ram's army. Hanuman, giving his first demonstration of his ever ready willingness to oblige in these matters, was happy to break the spell! imposed upon her.

The next adventure necessitated crossing a river; this presented no problem to the magically endowed Hanuman, who volunteered to go first and then extended his tail to create a rather sagging rope-type bridge which the others could use to cross. The horses wisely stayed behind whilst the others picked their way over. The fourth adventure was the meeting with a very plucked bird, and the Wat Khanon puppet of Sampatee (younger brother of the ill-fated Sadayu), initially hiding his featherlessness behind a bush, looked as though he had come straight off the dinner table; he was very naked indeed. Sampatee had made the mistake years before of trying to protect Sadayu from Phra Athit, but had, in the process, received a very severe singeing. However, he too was destined to be saved by the passage of Phra Ram's army; his feathers returned, and he was revealed as a beautiful hawklike bird fully capable of conveying Hanuman to Lanka in his search for the abducted Nang Sida.

To the regrets of many, especially the Thai-speaking members of the audience, it was considered advisable to bring the programme, which had now run for over two and a half hours, to a halt at this point as there was no other break in the story, acceptable to the performers, for about another two hours. So the Society members never saw the actual Presentation of the Ring at all; this, and Hanuman's dramatic burning of the palace in Lanka with the exquisite hide figures relevant to that part of the story, was reserved for those members of the public who attended the full house performance at Muang Thai Life Assurance the next afternoon.

It is very good news that Wat Khanon has pulled itself together again and it is a pleasure to see that their performance has lost none of the earlier sparkle, and, indeed, gives evidence of many devoted hours spent upon rehearsals so that peak performances can be presented on the rare occasions that they are still required. The group's recognition as a National Living Treasure is fully justified. There is now talk of the Fine Arts Department building a small museum in which some of the best and most interesting figures can be displayed. The additional encouragement given to them by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is most timely and should make the members feel that their labour of love all these years has not been in vain.

Khru Plueang Chairatsamee

The second performance by a National Living Treasure was that of Khru Plueang Chairatsamee of Kalasin, who came to Bangkok in the company of a large contingent of students and teachers from the Dramatic Arts College, where he is a special teacher in Northeastern traditional music, especially the *pong lang* and *khaen*. Compared with most Northeastern groups the crowd from Kalasin seemed to be very quiet and it was not until near the end of the second half that they came to life when giving their renditions of Soeng Yae Kai Mot Daeng

and Ruam Santrud, two Khmer-influenced folk dances. The former, depicting as it does the collecting of red ants' eggs from high up trees, just had to be taken at a brisk pace (as anyone who has ever walked through a red ants' supply route or even a suspended nest will readily concur!) and Ruam Santrud requires much more acting the goat on the part of the boys in order to get the girls to agree to dance. There is lots of scope for fun here and some fairly rough play can ensue if a girl is sufficiently provoked!

Khru Plueang, the ostensible star of the show, remained much in the background and had to be virtually dragged out before the audience so that they could enjoy some solo performances on his two special instruments. The programme mostly consisted of traditional music played on the *khaen* and the *pong lang* accompanied by the percussion, a battery of now-traditional bongo drums and of the *pin hai* clay pots plus the penetrating and plaintive sound of the *woot* (a circular set of pan pipes). Some modern pop songs were thrown in for good measure to help fill in the time required for dancers to change costumes. The girls' costumes were restrained in colour with many *pasins* being in shades of grey in typical diamond-patterned local weave, and the dances, as might be expected from a college of dramatic arts, were largely recreations based upon traditional movements of the *serng*. Khru Plueang was allowed greater freedom at the matinee played to a fairly full house at the Muang Thai auditorium the next afternoon, and the performances were far more lively. It is believed that because they were presenting their first programme at the Society in front of an audience of Thai *phu yai* and farangs the teachers had decreed that a very "proper" programme had to be presented. If this was so it was a regrettable misunderstanding and it follows the unfortunate lead given by the TAT and other government departments connected with tourism promotion who feel that all cultural presentations must be cleaned up and disciplined before public consumption to the extent that most of the fun is taken out of the event for everyone.

Hun Krabok

Mrs. Chusri Skulkaew (Pa Chuen), who has been making and performing with the bamboo puppets nearly all her long life, is the only puppeteer to have been selected for the honour of National Living Treasure. Whilst largely retired she still acts as an advisor to the Thammasat University puppet troupe when they request her services, and not having performed at the Society for some years, she kindly agreed to defer her retirement once more in order to give one last performance. For this she needed to make, or have made, a completely new set of puppets to match the stories which she chose to enact as most of her old figures had been sold off after one of her earlier announcements of official retirement. Sitting on a table before the show, a selection of some of these legless puppets, with their colourful long robes covering the common or garden bamboo sticks upon which their torsos and beautifully carved and painted heads fit, made a colourful grouping indeed; Totsagan reared his many heads above all the rest from



the back row, keeping company with the Rusi, whilst Phra Abhai Manee and his younger brother Srisuwan shared the front row with a heavily bejewelled and really handsome Hanuman; some of these figures, and others not on display, were sold before the night was out, and Muang Thai Life Assurance reserved one or two of the most attractive for their own collection.

At the commencement of the programme the musicians backstage struck up the overture at the end of which it was the turn of the puppets and their handlers to perform a *wai khru* ceremony to honour the spirits of past teachers of the puppeteer art. The programme proper then began with a *khon* demonstration of the well-known Ramakien episode, "The Abduction of Nang Sida," with a very beautifully crafted puppet taking the part of Totsagan's ill-fated nephew Mareet, as the Golden Deer, in order to lure Phra Ram away from Sida's side in the forest encampment. When Mareet had met his fate the rod-puppets' interpretation of the masked dance was completed all too soon, and an excerpt from the Lakhon Nok "Sang Thong," featuring Rochana's unexpected selection in front of her father's full court, of the apparent black negrito, Chao Ngo, as her husband-to-be, was staged before interval.

Afterwards it was the turn of an episode from Sunthorn Phu's famous story Phra Abhai Manee to be staged. This is the play that has been most associated with the late Nai Piak's Hun Krabok puppet troupe since the early days at the beginning of

Various Hun Krabok puppets by Mrs. Chusri Skulkaew (Pa Chuen).



Pa Chuen's puppet representation of the ogress Sin Samut from Sunthorn Phu's story Phra Abhai Manee.



The stage for the Hun Krabok presentation by Pa Chuen.

the century, and the group pulled out all the stops, even providing a large sailing ship in which the hero, his son by the ogress (Sin Samut), and his official wife, the Princess Suwan Malee, were all travelling. The furious Pisua Samut, with whom, in her human form, he had been cohabiting for some long time, brews up a storm and sinks the boat and pursues Phra Abhai as he swims to a nearby island where, in order to free himself from her importuning, he feels compelled to pull out his magic *pi* (oboe) which he then blows until she expires. He then has an attack of remorse, as she had been very kind to him during the years that she had held him hostage in her cave, but it is too late! Those unfamiliar with the story will have been surprised at the opening scene when an array of assorted sea monsters, including a spooky white skeleton, all awobble with a springy corkscrew body, conduct a humorous conversation to set the scene. These were Pisua's friends and relatives from below the waves.

Despite her 82 years, Pa Chuen was deeply involved back stage herself, helping to manipulate some of the principal characters and giving advice to her assistants to ensure that the quality of the production was up to her traditionally high standards. This was the only one of the National Living Treasure series to be given in the auditorium of the Society and the audience gained from the intimacy of the enclosed setting.

Manohra

The fourth National Living Treasure came from the South, Khru Yok Chubua of Songkhla, who, in addition to running his own Manohra troupe, is an advisor on Manohra dance to the Prince of Songkhla University group. Khru Yok was accompanied by Acharn Saroj Nakaviroj from the Songkhla Teachers College, and each master, with supporters, contributed half the full evening's entertainment.

The two halves provided a most interesting contrast in style: the really traditional first part, which was presented by Acharn Saroj, the foremost pupil and now leading exponent of the style of the late dance master Khun Upatham Narugorn (who performed at the Society on more than one occasion in the past and only passed away, well up in his eighties, a couple of years ago), and the quite different manner of the recently created 65-year-old National Living Treasure, Khru Yok. Khru Yok, despite having worked with Khun Upatham and studied the same traditions, has developed a free-form style very much his own which was instantly apparent when he took to the stage after the interval.

As befits a younger master Acharn Saroj opened the evening using only the basic instruments of *pi* (oboe), *klong koo*



A scene from Manohra as presented at The Siam Society by masters from Songkhla.

(pair of gongs in a box), *klong took* (double faced barrel drum), two *tap* (small vase-shaped single-headed drums) and *ching* (small cymbals) with the Ram Ta Khru Sorn (Homage to Teachers dance) and the Ram Ta Pratom (Dance Alphabet), both of which are known collectively as Ram Mae Bot. The former is a choral dance in which the dancers describe the debt of gratitude they owe to their teachers for all the instruction which they have received and without which they would be unable to perform. They used the traditional verses which say in part :

"Oh Teacher, you teach the style of hand movement
and how to wear a turban, and teach me how to put
on a bangle,
teach me to wear the head dress and catch the gar-
land,
teach me to put on a pair of bangles, left and right,
move the left hand by style, etc., etc.
We cannot find anyone like you, oh as like unto a
god."

Each line of the above is picked up and repeated by the chorus of musicians.

The second part of the Ram Mae Bot is the Ram Pratom. It is the alphabet and contains all the instructions for hand, leg and body movements and dance configurations, using such colourful descriptions as :

Brahma with Four Faces.

The Rabbit watches the Moon.

The Moon shines brightly with a brilliant circle around it.

The lion shows its tail.

The elephant eats grass, etc., etc.

Acharn Saroj completed his part of the programme with the Ram Klong Hong (Trapping the Swan) sequence, which is a very traditional part of an old-time Manohra performance and an essential part of the ceremonies associated with the fitting of the *sert* (coronet) and the tying of the *pa yai* (waist cloth) upon a student after completion of the many years' apprenticeship required to become a fully qualified dancer—and especially a teacher. He was joined by six of his students, and after some preliminary dancing the red masked hunter entered. In due course the supporting dancers leave the stage whilst the hunter completes his stalking and catching of his selected kinnaree with his rope. The prey (Acharn Saroj himself) is bound and unbound in an attempt to escape whilst the hunter holds on tight. In a move believed to represent the final power of good over evil the *hong* breaks free and makes good its escape. This is, of course, a rather different outcome to that associated with the Manohra Legend as told by the late master Upatham Narugorn in which the kinnaree princess (Nualthong Samlee) is indeed captured and taken off her island of banishment and carried, bound and protesting, before her father Phaya Sai Fai-fard before regaining her freedom. This again is different in outcome to that of the Manohra Chadok of the North and Northeast, where the kinnaree is captured but is then presented to the king's son as his wife.

After the interval Khru Yok took the stage to the additional musical accompaniment of the strings—*saw oo* and *saw duang* (a modern touch?)—and gave a solo performance of the Pleng Pi in which he demonstrated his close affinity to the music by performing graceful gestures whilst kneeling beside the *pi* player and reacting directly to his playing. Khru Yok was later joined by some members of his team in order to demonstrate the Ram Tam Bot which is traditionally used to describe, in dance and words, beautiful scenery encountered upon a journey over mountains and through forests. When the Tam Bot is not done as a solo descriptive dance it is the duty of the assistants to interrupt and prevent the principal dancer from ever completing his verse with a great deal of often extraneous and ribald comments making word play upon the original description. When well done this is much enjoyed by the audience.

The programme was brought to an end by Khru Yok demonstrating the Ram Pleng Tap Pleng which is danced to a form of poetry similar to Klon Suphap but with any number of lines from six to twelve in each verse. The *tap* in the dance title refers to the *tap* drum which is the most important instrument in a Manohra performance. This form of dance calls for instan-

taneous choreography and is normally reserved for Khat Khru ceremonies, but it can also be employed in Tam Bot sequences. As he had done with the *pi* in the earlier part of his performance Khru Yok also knelt down beside the *tap* drummer and allowed himself to become as one with the fast beat.

On this occasion neither teacher demonstrated any acrobatics or indulged in a display of contortions; perhaps the fact that what used to be an almost exclusively male dance form has now been infiltrated by female performers has something to do with this. Or maybe the teachers themselves are now older and the younger generation cannot or will not spare the time to learn in these modern days.

Lam Tat

The National Living Treasures series, which had drawn on the performing arts forms from the Central region, West, Northeast and South, was appropriately brought to a conclusion with a programme of folk music that originated in the South but which, along with the Lakhon Chatree, has long been domesticated in the central region and has also equally long ago found it necessary to drop the southern dialect for that of Central Thai. The Wang Teh troupe, led by Khun Wangdee Nima, better known by his *nom de théâtre* of Wang Teh, is the foremost exponent of this art form, in which witty repartee is the essential ingredient. He, like the troupe leaders of the other groups, was given the accolade of National Living Treasure by the National Cultural Committee in 1988 upon the inauguration of the distinction in that year.



The Wang Teh troupe of Lam Tat players enjoy their work as much as the audience does.

Lam Tat evolved from the Malaysian Dikay or Laku Yao and is believed to have originally come to Bangkok in the First Reign when it was performed by captives taken from Pattani by the Crown Prince of that era. In the early days the performances were presented by all-male troupes, but, as with Lakhon Chatree, Manohra, Lakhon Nok, etc., which have all suffered from a shortage of young males willing to devote their time to studying the form seriously, has now accepted female exponents for many years past, and no doubt gained a certain piquancy by so doing.

In a Lam Tat performance the traditional musical instruments used in the accompaniment are very simple: the *ching* (small cymbals), *kraap* (wooden clappers) and the big one-faced, open-ended *ramana* drums. In this case Wang Teh fielded four of the latter and gave some idea of their use in the overture to his show. This was followed by an introduction (Rong Ban Ton), sung by a leading man, which in verse form paid homage to old teachers, introduced the few other performers and asked for the support and understanding of the audience. The leading male supporting singer followed this up with a song describing the historical background of Lam Tat and added some proverbs on good behaviour for good measure.

It was then the turn of the ladies to describe the importance of the *ramana* drum to the timekeeping of the whole show. This done, a few insults were then hurled at the men, who responded in kind with vigour and the troupe moved into a demonstration of instantaneous response ("Rong Kae Pleng"). When they felt they had enough of this they moved on to a demonstration of a style used in courting.

There should have been an interval at this period but it was brushed past so that the introduction to various types of folk-song (which Wang Teh collects as a hobby) could be given speedily in order that the group could rush off to a second engagement where their presence was eagerly awaited that same night. Pleng Choy, Pleng Khiew Khao and Pleng E-saew were covered. Much of the wordplay no doubt went largely over the heads of the mostly foreign audience assembled on the lawn, but from their faces there is no doubt that the Wang Teh troupe were having a ball, whether the audience followed them or not!

Whilst the audiences at the Society rather tended to tail off towards the end of the series from an initial turnout of around 120, the Muang Thai Life Assurance auditorium hosted an almost full house of around 300 on most occasions the following day. The company have expressed themselves as being pleased with the first cooperative effort between themselves and the Society. Studio 10, who also shared in the expenses of board and lodging for the visiting troupes in exchange for the video rights, are also happy with the results, from which, in due course, we hope to obtain edited video films as a record of this interesting series by designated national Living Treasures.

Khun Euayporn Kerdchuay is to be congratulated upon his initiative and administrative skill in locating the performers and ensuring that all went smoothly during the course of their respective visits. We look forward to a second series of programmes some time in the future.