



## The Struggle for (Self) Possession: The Political Bodies in Contemporary Thai Performing Arts

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Iceberg (Sodsai Pantoomkomol Centre for Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2014), directed by and featuring Teerawat Mulvilai (Kage), one of the actors in *Pratthana*.

The year 2018 marked the fourth year of Thailand's military regime. The government was installed in 2014, following a coup d'état, the country's 19th since the year 1932 when Thailand changed from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. It was Thailand's second military coup in eight years and the third in 23 years. For Khao Sing, the principal character in the play *Pratthana - A Portrait of Possession*, the 2014 coup is his third. His body and those of others he came into intimate contact with have known since their youth what it is like to live in a state where freedom is fragile and ephemeral. They are as intimate with power as they are with their own bodies and each other. And as a result, these bodies know what it is like to live under the watchful eye of authority figures. These bodies know what it is like to never be in full possession of their own bodies.

*Rang Khong Pratthana* (The Body of Desire), the novel by Thai author Uthis Haemamool from which director Toshiki Okada adapted the play, begins with a description of not a man per se, but a young male body—nameless. The body is being secretly observed by a man who is also using that body as a model.

The young man is aware of the observer's presence and his own position as the object of another's gaze. He also imagines himself as an object of the gazer's sexual desire. The nameless man enjoys the power of his own beauty and almost challenges the gazer by being playful, teasing the gazer by disappearing under the water before splaying beside the pool to soak in the sun and putting his body in full view of the gazer once again.

What the gazed-upon does not realize is that he is merely a body to the gazer. When that body of his coughs, it turns into a living being for the gazer, causing former to lose interest in his subject. The sound of a cough, coupled with something akin to speaking, is a sign not only of life, but of a human being. The gazer has no interest in what the gazed upon has to say. The gazer has no interest in his subject as a human being.

In the theatrical adaptation, the entire stage is under the watchful eye not only of the audience but also of cameras. The cast and the crew are visible to the audience at all times. From one side of the stage, the actors watch fellow actors perform while along the other side of the stage the crew sit behind their equipment. All the props and materials for sound effects are exposed. Less conspicuous, however, is a camera. It is sitting there somewhere, and sometimes, the object, person, or action under its gaze is projected onto the screen for all to see. The stage and all that takes place on it is under surveillance.

Once the actors have positioned themselves along one side of the stage, some members of the crew begin to create the sound of water; a string of light on the floor lights up, blue like water; an actor stands up and removes his shirt to reveal his naked torso. He sets the scene: a swimming pool. He gazes into the water as he

speaks about a young man who he is trying to take a selfie of his reflection in the pool—a modern-day Narcissus. Another actor, lying flat on his stomach with a phone in hand, is filming the stage, panning the camera back and fourth.

In Thailand, an erotic or sexual portrayal of the body in words and pictures are more commonplace and accepted than on screen and on stage. Even on screen—TV and film—portrayal of physical and sexual intimacy has been more explicit than on stage. Reading about the character's sexual adventures in the novel never felt like an act of transgression. If the author had wanted to portray these characters and their bodies as products of a long history of political oppression, it never came through.

But whatever struggle with oppression the characters feel, they rebel against it through their body. The swimmer challenges the power of his observer's gaze through the assertion of the erotic and sexual power of his body. Sex makes them feel alive, powerful and transgressive. These are private acts of rebellion—insignificant on the structural level, but cathartic and empowering to the sense of dignity in these characters. Sex and art are ways of dealing with the sense of powerlessness and restore the sense of dignity denied by a long and shared history of oppression. These are powerless bodies struggling to break free to claim possession of their own being.

In undemocratic times in Thailand, speech and words in the public space become the easiest to suppress. When words are dangerous, it is no surprise then that contemporary Thai theatre artists often resort to the body.

### My Body, My Art

The Thai body in the performing arts has long been linked with the country's most sacred institutions. When Thailand was still an absolute monarchy, the palace was where the classical dances and dance-dramas developed and where dancers were trained. National Artist Mattani Moj dara Rutnin<sup>[1]</sup> writes in the preface of her book, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, of the influential role the monarchy once played in the development of Thai performing arts, noting that “[i]n the past, once regional folk dances and dramas were adopted by the royal court, they became royal prerogatives and taboo for the general public.”

In 1932, the kingdom became a constitutional monarchy. The following year, the Department of Fine Arts was established under the Ministry of Education. Performing arts that were once under the patronage of the monarchy came under the control of the government. Witthayalai Natsain, or the College of Dramatic Arts<sup>[2]</sup>, was founded in 1934 to educate and train students in Thai performing arts. The higher education institution is today under the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture and offers training in both Thai and Western performing arts.

Being the most elaborate and sumptuous, *khon*, the classical masked dance-drama, has become one of the most internationally recognizable symbols of Thai culture. Queen Sirikit under the Reign of King Rama IX has played a major role in reviving the art form with the modernization of the set and the restoration of the costume to its old glory. There has been an annual staging of the Royal Khon (Khon Phra Ratchatan)<sup>[3]</sup> since 2007. Last year, UNESCO inscribed khon on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

While Thai audience get to see both traditional and contemporary performances from foreign countries that are supported by their embassies in Thailand, the Thai government still mainly brings khon to showcase on the international stage and pays little to no attention to contemporary theatre artists. Throughout the history of Thailand, khon has been used by both the court and the government for various purposes, including political ones<sup>[4]</sup>. Today khon is an important tool of the government for diplomacy, cultural promotion, and tourism.

It is no surprise that the government and its exclusive support for traditional art forms is an easy target of criticism for independent theatre artists. But pride in Thai classical dance is instilled in Thais at an early age through primary and secondary school curriculum. Thais are thus taught from youth that Thai classical dance is an integral part of the national identity.

When Thai classical dance began to be combined with Western theatre aesthetics and contemporary Western dance techniques in the 1990s, a few artists who were trained in Western dances began taking up Thai classical dance, most notably Manop Meejamrat of Patravadi Theatre<sup>[5]</sup>. Some of these artists saw it as a return to their Thai roots. Fusing Thai and Western dances became another way to pay respect to tradition and express pride

- 1 National Artist Mattani Moj dara Rutnin is a former professor of drama and literature at Thammasat University. She helped found the university's Drama Department and spearheaded the establishment of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts. Apart from her writing on theatre and literature in Thai and English, she has also written TV scripts and translated and adapted Western plays, including *Macbeth*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- 2 Witthayalai Nattasin was founded in 1934 by Luang Wichitwathakan, a Thai historian, writer, diplomat, and politician, who modeled it after L'École des Beaux-Arts and L'Académie de Danse et Musique. With 12 locations across the country, the school currently offers secondary and higher education and has expanded its curriculum to include Western performing arts.
- 3 Royal Khon is a project initiated by Queen Sirikit that began with the queen's effort to revive the khon costumes. Through the queen's SUPPORT foundation's collaboration with a range of artisans and arts experts, a new set of new khon costumes, including the masks, were created. The first public performance of the Royal Khon was in December 2007. It has since become an annual event, with the number of performances increasing each year.
- 4 Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, (Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 1996), XIV
- 5 Dancer-choreographer Manop Meejamrat was one of the students of veteran Thai theatre director and playwright Patravadi Mejudhon, who founded her eponymous theatre company in 1992. Patravadi Theatre was known for its stage adaptations of Thai classic literature that combine Thai and Western theatrical forms. Manop emerged in the 90s as one of the most internationally recognized dancers and choreographers who fused Thai classical dance with modern dance. He is the 2005 recipient of Silpathorn Awards in the performing arts category. The awards, established and presented by Thailand's Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, honor mid-career artists across seven fields of art.

- 6 Founded 1998, Komonlagoon Dance Troupe was a Thai contemporary dance company that blended Thai classical dance with contemporary dance and various dance techniques. After the death of its founder, Thongchai Hannarong, in 2011, one of the students, Supachai Dontri, founded another dance troupe in 2012, Komonlasilp (By Komonlagoon), to continue the vision started by Thongchai. It is not clear whether the company is still active.
- 7 Thongchai Hannarong was an award-winning dancer-choreographer. In 2007 and 2008, he won awards for his choreography at the International Dance Festival in Jakarta, Indonesia, and in Beijing, China, respectively. In 2007, he collaborated with Japanese choreographer Zan Yamashita for the celebration of 120 years of diplomatic relationship between Thailand and Japan in Yokohama, Japan.
- 8 Ottamthullal is dance-drama originating from Kerala, India.
- 9 Dancer-choreographer Pichet Klunchun founded Pichet Klunchun Dance Company, formerly called LifeWork Company, in 2004. He received a Silpathorn Award in 2006.
- 10 Chaiyot Khummanee was a respected khon dancer (in the demon role) and teacher at the College of Dramatic Arts. He was one of the 12 khon dancers selected to be bestowed the status of khon teacher (*krab khru*) by King Bhumibol in 1984. According to Pichet's interview with Thai-language *Manager* newspaper in 2012, Chaiyot left the College of Dramatic Arts due to his disappointment with its curriculum. Pichet met Chaiyot when the former was 16. Chaiyot was teaching khon in his own home, not an uncommon training practice for the older generations of dancers. Pichet credits Chaiyot's teaching as an inspiration for him to continually question how khon could become a more integral part of contemporary Thai society.
- 11 Sasapin Siriwanij is a director, producer, and award-winning performer. Her performance in *Oh! Ode* won her the Best Performance by a Female Performer award from the International Association of Theatre Critics – Thailand Center (IATC – TC). Her first solo work, *I Didn't Launch a Thousand Ships*, also tackles the relationship between the Thai female body, Thai beauty ideal, and Thai politics.

in Thainess. Komonlagoon Dance Troupe<sup>[6]</sup> founder, the late Thongchai Hannarong<sup>[7]</sup>, who was trained in ballet and Indian classical dance ottamthullal<sup>[8]</sup>, also combined Western dances with Thai and Indian classical dances in his creations that were often inspired by Buddhism, Thailand's major religion.

But an encounter between a contemporary artist and a performing art long upheld and safeguarded by the most powerful forces in the country is sometimes not without tension. For a contemporary performer like Pichet Klunchun<sup>[9]</sup>, one of the most internationally recognized Thai performing artists today, an encounter with the Thai classical dance is at times an encounter with the Establishment. In the past decade, more theatre artists are using Thai classical dance as a tool of subversion and to critique state power. And more dancers trained in Thai classical dance are following in the footsteps of Pichet, asserting their own identity and crossing the border into contemporary dance territory.

Classical dancers' bodies dictate what role they will play. And they train for a role that they will most likely play for the rest of their career. In khon, a male performer can be trained to dance a human, demon, or monkey role, depending on the size of his body. Khon dancers wear elaborate glittery costumes, exposing little skin. The heads and faces of male dancers in monkey and demon roles are covered with a mask, and they never speak or sing. The narration, singing, and dialogues are executed by non-dancers.

In Pichet's *I Am a Demon* (2005), created as a tribute to his late teacher and khon master Chaiyot Khummanee<sup>[10]</sup>, the body of a khon dancer is seen and his voice heard. Pichet, clad in only a pair of skin-tight shorts, begins the piece with not a dance, but a khon drill of foot stomping. The piece then moves into a performance of a scene from the *Ramayana*. In Thailand, the piece was performed in a small space that could accommodate fewer than 50 people in the audience. You could hear Pichet breathe; you could see the expression on the dancer's face, instead of the frozen one of the mask, and the muscular working of khon on the body. At one point in the performance, a video plays. It is of a conversation between Pichet and his late khon teacher about the development of the art form.

*I Am a Demon* is a personalization of khon and a declaration of personal ownership of the art form. To strip away the ornate khon costume is to remove khon of its grandeur and status symbol. The act reveals the human form. The stripping away of Thai classical dance's power, which is tightly bound to the power of the state, is a reclaiming of the power of the individual body.

The struggle for ownership of self, body, and identity through classical dance can also be seen in *Oh! Ode* by Sasapin Siriwanij<sup>[11]</sup>. While for Pichet, Thai classical dance is the roots from which his artistry and aesthetic branch out and blossom, for Sasapin, a member of physical theatre company B-floor Theatre and co-founder of experimental theatre company For What Theatre, Thai classical dance is a form of oppression.

Sasapin's training is not in Thai classical dance, but she first came in contact with it in *The Test of Endurance* (2015), directed by B-floor Theatre's co-founder Jaa Phantachat. In it, the faces and bare torsos of the two performers (Sasapin and Jaa) were painted with colorful abstract designs. They performed a sequence of dance that was repeated non-stop until the last audience member decided to leave the room. It was a physically demanding creation that sometimes lasted over two hours.

Sasapin's involvement in *The Test of Endurance* led her to create *Oh! Ode* two years later. "[E]very part of my body realized how unnatural the ideal form of female beauty of this culture was," Sasapin writes of her experience in *The Test of Endurance* in a note that appears at the end of *Oh! Ode*. The title is the play on the Thai word *ode*, which means to complain, moan, or wail. Together with "oh," the title evokes pain and discomfort.

At the beginning of the show, Sasapin stands topless, wearing only a pair of skin-color underwear. Then a group of artists crowd around her, painting her entire body into an image of a Thai classical dancer as she performs a Thai classical dance routine, moving fluidly at an excruciatingly slow pace. Once the artwork on her body is completed, she freezes in a Thai dance pose and is roped off like a museum exhibit.

After a few minutes, Sasapin bends her body and stretches her face to break free from the paint that inhibits her body. Before our eyes, this body/art object, transforms into a human once again.

It is important to note that public nudity is a misdemeanor in Thailand. Sasapin's choice to bare her body is not only an aesthetic one, but a political one. In the piece, the bare body is a free body. In an undemocratic society, freedom is vulgar to those in power. To cover a free body with an image of the highest of a Thai

performing art form is to impose on it a moral ideal, thereby erasing the vulgarity of freedom and individuality. Sasapin's body struggles not only against a beauty ideal that Thai classical dance represents, it also fights against a moral ideal that values obedience and modesty in women.

### The Body Censored / The Body Erased

One of the most protected institution in Thailand is that of the monarchy. The kingdom has a draconian *lèse majesté* law, also known as Section 112, which has been much weaponized against political enemies by politicians and citizens alike. Government censorship in the past five years has been at its worst in decades. As a result, self-censorship in the media and the arts has been heightened, especially on subjects that have long been tabooed in Thai society.

Since theatre receives little attention from the government and the general public, it has largely escaped censorship. The theatre has been the place the see art that is critical of the country's most sacred institutions. And few other theatre artists in Thailand have addressed the issues of censorship or critiqued Thailand's most venerable institutions as much as the artists of B-floor Theatre and dancer-choreographer Thanapol Virulhakul<sup>[12]</sup>.

Only twice did the theatre faced censorship in the past decade. The first, and the most severe, was in 2015 when two theatre activists involved in the play *Jaosao Mapa* (The Wolf Bride)<sup>[13]</sup>, staged in 2013 as part of an event to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October 14 student uprising, was convicted of *lèse majesté* and sentenced to five years in prison (commuted to two and a half years for the guilty plea).

The second incident happened to the B-floor Theatre's revival production of *Bang La Merd* (2015), a solo performance written and directed by Ornanong Thaisriwong<sup>[14]</sup>. Before the premier, authorities contacted the production to inquire whether it had obtained permission to stage the show from the government—a non-existent practice. For the entire run of *Bang La Merd*, two military officers were present each evening with a video camera to record the performance. Following the production's run, no legal action was ever taken against the artists involved or the performance venue, but that was the most intrusive the military government has ever gotten with a theatre production.

The significance of *Bang La Merd* is not what happened to it, but rather how it explicitly addresses censorship and Thailand's *lèse majesté* law through both words and movement. Most theatre creations tackle issues relating to the monarchy or the current military regime through cryptic words, if words are used at all, but mostly through the body.

In the first version of *Bang La Merd* (2012), Ornanong confesses that she had initially wanted to do something with the Royal Anthem but eventually decided against it because toying with something that has to do with the monarchy in a way that could be deemed disrespectful was not worth the risk. Ornanong's body goes on to gasp for air and stiffens and convulse in agony. She puts her body in a structure with holes so that only parts of her body can be seen just like the incomplete video clips, texts, interviews with political prisoners that she plays for the audience. From a whole human being, walking and talking in plain sight, to a body hidden and incomplete—a censored body.

In the second version of *Bang La Merd*, staged in the aftermath of the *Wolf Bride* incident, the censored body is also a vulnerable body, exposed to danger. Ornanong hangs hundreds of razor blades from the low ceiling of a shophouse where she performed. At one point, she stands on a chair and puts her head into a sea of razor blades. The performance moves outdoors, where Ornanong, now stripped to her underwear, climbs up to the roof and stands defiantly, with little to cover or protect her body.

Like in *Bang La Merd*, we also see bodies gasping for air in *Oxygen*, directed by B-floor co-founder Teerawat Mulvilai<sup>[15]</sup> and choreographed by Thanapol Virulhakul, a physical theatre piece about Thailand's long history of political violence. The bodies in *Oxygen* sometimes soften and submit to power, sometimes inflate and fills up with the spirit of rebellion.

While *Oxygen* depicts political repressions that fuel and deflate the human body and spirits, the bodies are practically lifeless in Thanapol's *Girl X* (2015), a re-make of a Japanese play of the same name by director Suguru Yamamoto of Hanchu-Yuei theatre company. The bodies lying on the floor represent works of art "in which the artists' names do not appear." The bodies move ploddingly from one tableau to another when the date and artwork description change. We soon find out that these works of art were made during major wars

- 12 Thanapol Virulhakul is an award-winning dancer-choreographer and co-artistic director of Democracy Theatre Studio. His *Hipster the King* won three awards from the IATC – TC and was selected for the Offene Welt Internationales Festival in Ludwigshafen, Germany, and the STORE HOUSE Collection in Japan. In 2016, he collaborated with Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe for *Happy Hunting Ground*, which was staged in Thailand, Germany, and Switzerland. His most recent work, *The Retreat*, was part of the Ghost series at BANGKOK CITYCITY GALLERY and had a work-in-progress open workshop at this year's TPAM.
- 13 The staging of *Jaosao Mapa* was a reunion of Prakaifai Karnlakorn theatre troupe, which was founded in 2010. The troupe performed at political protests and in rural areas free of charge. The staging was broadcast on Asia Update channel, the clip of which was screened to members of an ultra-royalist group to plan legal actions against those involved in the play. Even some members of the media urged legal actions. Three people involved in the play were charged. Pornthip Munkong and Patiwat Saraiyaem were sentenced to two years in prison and released in August 2016. Jaran Ditapichai has been granted political refugee status by the French government.
- 14 Ornanong Thaisriwong is a performer, director, and producer best known for her political solo performances. She has received awards for both her film and stage roles. The first version of *Bang La Merd*, Ornanong's directorial debut, won her two awards from the IATC – TC: Best Original Script of a Play and Best Performance by a Female Performer. Her most recent solo performance, *Sawan Arcade*, won her another performance award earlier this year.
- 15 Performer and director, Teerawat Mulvilai is a 2018 recipient of Silpathorn Awards. He was part of Thailand's seminal political theatre company, Crescent Moon Theatre, some of whose members co-founded B-floor Theatre in 1999. Teerawat has won the most awards from the IATC – TC for his physical theatre productions and performances. He is currently B-floor Theatre's co-artistic director with Jaa Phantachai, a 2014 recipient of Silpathorn Awards. Teerawat has collaborated with numerous artists in Asia, most recently in the three-year-long *Something Missing* trilogy with South Korean director Jongyeon Yoon of Theatre Momgool.

16 *The Satapana (Establishment) trilogy*—*Satapana: Red Tank* (2014), *Satapana: Iceberg* (2014), and *Iceberg: The Invisible* (2015)—comprises solo performances staged in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 military coup. The trilogy addresses political violence, censorship, and forgotten historical events in Thailand.

and violent political events in the 20th and 21st centuries. The events in Thailand, especially, are the ones that have been systematically repressed or erased by those in power.

All are nameless in *Girl X*, the casualties of wars, the artists who depict them, and the authors of these violence. The limp bodies on the floor are not only the lifeless remains of the war, they are also anonymous and unacknowledged in history. But anonymity here erases the powerless and protects the powerful.

Perhaps the most visceral depiction of the body that has long suffered the violence and indignity of political oppression and censorship is in Teerawat's solo performance *Iceberg*, the second installment in the *Satapana (Establishment) trilogy*<sup>[16]</sup>, performed only a few months after the 2014 coup. The violence depicted in the first half of this show is brutal and carried out by a masked and gloved figure. A block of ice becomes a stand-in for the human body. Holes are drilled into it. Red paint is poured into it. It gets violently hacked and dragged around the stage as it melts and fills the stage with a trail of blood-colored liquid.

Eventually, Teerawat sheds the mask, the gloves, the jacket, the shirt down to his bare torso. He is no longer a ruthless figure of power, but an ordinary man. In this role, he dances a desperate number, flailing his limbs, throwing himself to the floor, and slapping his own face to silence his own thoughts. It is a body that is at once humiliated and defiant. A body that has been taught to self-censor and that certain thoughts are criminal. But in that desperation and obsequiousness, there is a body longing to be free.

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*OH! ODE (Oh! What Joy, What Goodness, What Beauty Calls for an Ode No.7012)* (WTF Gallery and Café, 2017), a performance project by Sasapin Siriwonjji (Pupe), one of the actors in *Pratthana*.  
Photo by Wichaya Artamat

*The Test of Endurance* (B-Floor's Room, Pridi Banomyong Institute, 2015), directed by and featuring Jarunat Phantachai (Jaa), one of the actors in *Pratthana*.  
Photo by Wichaya Artamat

