

The Survival and Adaptation of Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis)

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Thailand houses a great variety of art and culture, all of which is uniquely splendid (Virunrak, 2000 p. 19). Among these are the Thai theatrical arts, such as *Khon*¹, *Lakhon*², *Fonram*³, *Rabam*⁴ and puppetry – the cultural heritage handed down from the beginning of the Thai culture in 1238 (Sukhothai period). Accordingly, methods for the preservation and development of these invaluable heritages are vital in keeping them alive in Thai society.



Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis)

Photo: P. Jirajarupat

Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis)⁵ – also known as *Nattayasala Hun Lakhon Lek* – is Thailand's first institution dedicated to Thai theatrical puppetry performance, which has revived and preserved its traditions and performance in Thai society; a modern society engulfed with influences from western cultures. Among these changes and external cultural influences, the uniqueness, traditions, and aesthetic values of Thai theatrical puppetry have been successfully sustained. Therefore, the present research on the survival and adaptation of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) explores the history and development of Thai theatrical puppetry, the factors helping the survival of the art in the globalised world, as well as its adaptation to the changing society.

This research has been conducted through the study of books and documents pertaining to Thai puppet performance, interviews with people involved in the running and well-being of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis), as well as observations made at the theatre by the author. The analysis of the data from this study led to the following conclusions.

Thai puppet performance can be categorised into four types: *Hun Luang*, *Hun Wang Na*, *Hun Krabok*⁶, and the Thai theatrical puppetry or *Hun Lakhon Lek* (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 22). Thai theatrical puppetry or *Hun Lakhon Lek* was created during the reign of King Rama VI by Maestro Krae Saptawanit, who was the leader of a stage drama troupe and a royal page in Woradit Palace (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 87). The puppets in Thai theatrical puppetry performances are full-figure puppets, each with a head, arms, and legs, and some can be manipulated to point their fingers and move their necks (Chandavij & Pramualratana, 1998, p. 84). The mechanism for the manipulation of the puppets is such that it takes three puppeteers to control one puppet. A pulley and a rope are attached to parts of the body for the manipulation of separate parts. This mechanism allows the puppets' movements to appear realistic and more graceful (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 42). It can be stated that the uniqueness and beauty of the Thai theatrical puppetry lies in the connection of the minds of the three puppeteers and their concentration, which is transferred to the puppet, making the puppet seem as though it were alive. Examples of the popular stories used in the Thai theatrical puppetry performances are *Phra Aphai Manee*, the romantic story by Sunthorn Phu Thai poet laureate and *Ramayana the historical drama which originated in India*.

In the past, all four types of puppetry performances were popular in Thai society, evidenced in historical records regarding the employment of puppet performances as major entertainment on various occasions and for many royal ceremonies, e.g. royal cremation ceremonies (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 145). Sadly, today their popularity has decreased; the *Hun Luang* and *Hun Wang Na* performances are no longer in practice. The puppets formerly used in the performances are now housed by the National Museum in Bangkok, so that people of later generations will be able to witness the material culture and skills of their ancestors in creating this precious art. Even though hired theatrical troupes perform *Hun Krabok* and Thai theatrical puppetry on

occasions, such as the Chucherdchamnansil Hun Krabok Troupe (Hemsrichart, 2002, p. 60) and the Chakrapan Posayakrit Hun Krabok Troupe, the number is small (Virunrak, 2000, p. 30). There is only one Thai theatrical puppetry troupe, i.e. Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis), whose theatre is situated at Suan Lum Night Bazaar, Bangkok.

The Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) was founded in the determination to revive the life of Thai theatrical puppetry by the Yangkhiawsod family under the leadership of Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod (known as Joe Louis), the 1996 National Artist for Thai theatrical puppetry. Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod was born on a Saturday in March 1922 in Nonthaburi. He was the son of Mr. Khui and Mrs. Chuem Yangkhiawsod, two puppeteers of Maestro Krae Saptawanit's puppets (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 47). As the son of artists, Master Sakhon was surrounded by the traditions of Thai theatrical puppetry. He was fascinated by puppetry, and grew up to be talented in making Khon masks and headgear. The master eventually became the inheritor of Thai theatrical puppetry from Grandmother Yib Saptawanit, the daughter-in-law of Maestro Krae Saptawanit.

Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod fathered seven sons and two daughters, all of whom grew up with and were taught theatrical arts, especially *Khon* and Thai theatrical puppetry from childhood and, for this reason, subsequently inherited the trade from their father. When he first took over the trade from Grandmother Yib, Master Sakhon did not immediately offer Thai theatrical puppetry shows (Posayakrit, 1986, p. 55). Instead, he founded a theatrical arts troupe, the Sakhon Nattasilp Troupe, which was hired to perform *Khon* and *Likay*⁷ in ceremonies. The master also made *Khon* masks and headdresses for sale.

Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod began to offer Thai theatrical puppetry performances, which interested a great number of viewers. Over 50 years later, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) perceived the importance of preserving this art form, and Master Sakhon was requested to perform theatrical puppet shows once again. With his determination, Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod fought to put Thai theatrical puppetry in the spotlight so that both Thai and international audiences would be able to witness this fine cultural heritage.

On May 21st, 2007 Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod departed this world from pulmonary disease and acute kidney failure. His death brought great grief to his family members, and it was a great loss to theatrical art circles in Thailand. Since the master had built a strong foundation for Thai theatrical puppetry when he was alive, the art form continues under the new leadership of his two sons, Mr. Pisoot Yangkhiawsod and Mr. Surin Yangkhiawsod.

It was not easy for the troupe to become the successful Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) that it is today, and Master Sakhon as his family struggled to sustain the tradition of Thai theatrical puppetry. The history of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) can be divided into the following three periods (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 65).

The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe period

This troupe was established after TAT requested that there be a re-creation of Thai theatrical puppets. In these performances, Master Sakhon revived as well as developed the performances that he had learned from Maestro Krae Saptawanit. Some adjustment was made for the new era, especially in terms of the puppets, which became more attractive to contemporary audiences and whose figures were better proportioned. Moreover, the puppets were able to move more realistically. The Khon story was frequently performed, separated into short episodes, such as *Hanuman chasing after Nang Ramayana Suphanmatcha* (Yupho, 1968, p. 10). The Thai Traditional Music Band was engaged for each show. The troupes are also frequently hired for ordination ceremonies and funerals.

The Joe Louis Theatre period

In 1995, Mr. Pisoot Yangkhiawsod and Mr. Surin Yangkhiawsod travelled to France and visited a theatre for puppet performances. They consulted Master Sakhon about building a theatre when they arrived back in Thailand. A friend of Mr. Pisoot and Mr. Surin, moreover, was in the tourism business, and suggested that they have a Thai theatrical puppetry theatre where the friend would bring tourists during their visit in Thailand. In 1997, the first Thai theatrical puppetry theatre was built in an open area in front of their rental home in Nonthaburi (Posayakrit, 1986, p. 76). It was a temporary theatre consisting only of a puppetry stage. On May 17th, 1999 as the shows began to prosper and a plan for a permanent theatre was in progress, a fire broke out at the Yangkhiawsod family's home where the theatre was located. All the puppets were destroyed in the fire, and the family was forced to start anew. The Thai theatrical puppetry performances returned to business with the help of various institutions as well as donations from the people who learned about the fire. Finally in late 1999, the Joe Louis Theatre on Bangkok-Nonthaburi 12 Lane, Nonthaburi, was established as a playhouse for Thai theatrical puppetry and as a resource centre

The style of the performances became more distinct with the appearance of puppets relatively similar to those used in the first period, and with *Ramayana* as their main stories. Dancers, however, were employed in this period to accompany the puppetry performance. In addition, the music used during the shows was pre-recorded instead of live. During this period of Thai theatrical puppetry it was not a large business because the members of the organisation were from the Yangkhiawsod family. In spite of the financial difficulties, the Joe Louis Theatre survived through a number of crises because of the determination and strength of the family.

Nattayasala Hun Lakhon Lek – Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis)

This period began in 2000 when a business investment proposal was presented to the troupe by Marketplace Co., the company overseeing the businesses at Suan Lum Night Bazaar. The Joe Louis Theatre was then

moved to Suan Lum Night Bazaar and was granted a new name, Nattayasala Hun Lakhon Lek, by Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana. The troupe continued to encounter various problems, including financial problems caused by rental fees for the area where the theatre was located after the former investment agreement with Marketplace Co. was altered. The theatre's running costs were more than its income; electricity and water were once cut off because the theatre could not afford to pay the utility bills.

With help from many organisations however, the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) was saved again and has prevailed until the present day. The determination of the Yangkhiawsod family members and every person in the troupe in preserving and developing Thai theatrical puppetry was rewarded when the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) received The Best Traditional Performance at the World Festival of Puppet Art 2006 in Prague, Czech Republic during June 6-11 of that year. In this period, the performances the theatre offered became more modern, as their clientele are primarily tourists, and the style of the shows was adjusted so that it was more appropriate for this audience. The puppets changed in their structure, mechanism, and even attire, so as to appear more attractive (Posayakrit, 1986, p. 85). Furthermore, greater variety was employed in the stories used in the shows; in addition to *Ramayana*, others were used as well, such as *The Overture* – a story adapted from a recent Thai movie – and *The Myth of Rahoo*, the story of the legend of Rahu.

It is not easy for a small group of people to preserve a national art and the Yangkhiawsod family was faced with many obstacles. At last, the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) was granted royal patronage by Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana, and The Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre Foundation was established for the continued preservation and development of Thai traditional puppetry. However, there are also many other factors helping the survival of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 100) as follows:

The most important factor in the continued existence of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) is the determination to keep Thai theatrical puppetry active. A symbol of this determination by the Yangkhiawsod family was the founding of the organisation for theatrical puppetry performances when they were The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe. Subsequently, an area in the Nonthaburi home that they rented was used as a temporary theatre for tourists, both Thai and international, to view the shows. After the fire, they had a new theatre on Bangkok-Nonthaburi 12 Lane, which became a permanent theatre named the Joe Louis Theatre. This new theatre was built so that Thai theatrical puppetry performances could be offered daily and the theatre used as a place in which to develop knowledge of the art (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 108). The troupe was finally contacted to move to Suan Lum Night Bazaar, where they are currently located and where a number of Thai theatrical puppetry shows have been offered. Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana granted the theatre's name, the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis).

Income considerations

Finances were another crucial factor that helped the troupe to survive although the income received during each period varied.

During the period The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe, the income was variable. This inconsistency was due to the fact that the amount of work and money charged depended, case by case, on the members of the troupe, with Master Sakhon making decisions on for whom they would perform and on how much money they would request for the performance. The amount of money received would be divided between the puppeteers and musicians, and a separate amount kept as capital for further shows (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 52).

The income at the Joe Louis Theatre on Bangkok-Nonthaburi 12 Lane however, differed owing to their having a permanent theatre where the shows could be held regularly. In this way, a fee for tickets could be collected. The income at the rental home theatre in Nonthaburi, before the fire was derived from the flat rate they charged per show per number of viewers: US\$55-85 per 20 to 30 viewers. However, the income the troupe received at the Joe Louis Theatre came from various sources. With a permanent theatre, the troupe was able to have a marketing plan to attract audiences, both Thai and international, and educational institutions, for example, schools and universities (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 105). The total income can be broken down as follows:

- A ticket fee for regular shows at the theatre with each seat costing approximately US\$6 per Thai viewer and US\$17 per foreign tourist. The shows were offered daily at 10 a.m. on Mondays through Fridays and at 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.
- For special shows and shows for students, a less expensive flat rate was charged as the shows were considered educational. In such a case, each show cost approximately US\$100-160 per 150 students.
- In addition to shows offered at the theatre, the troupe was hired to perform at different locations. The charges depended on the stories used in the shows with a cost of approximately US\$230-550 per show.
- Another source of income came from their performances abroad to publicise the art and culture of Thailand. These were often made possible by the state, and the amount of money received was not very large. Notwithstanding the fact that often puppeteers received only small allowances, these shows were beneficial for the art as a whole: they allowed the troupe to present Thai theatrical puppetry to a broader public.

As the troupe moved into the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) at Suan Lum Night Bazaar, they experienced a number of changes (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 60). The most visible was the larger organisation they had now become, necessitating a more business-like management style. The income they received was now also more consistent.

- Regular shows are offered daily at 7 p.m. Tickets approximately US\$12 per Thai viewer and US\$25 per foreign tourist.
- A flat rate is charged for special shows and shows for students, with each show costing between US\$500-600.
- Shows elsewhere in Thailand are also offered, and the troupe can be hired to perform on different occasions at ceremonies, parties, and conferences. Prices begin at US\$450 per show, depending on the details of the show as requested by clients.
- Thai theatrical puppetry performances outside Thailand are oftentimes arranged by the state, such as the Ministry of Culture, making income from this source vary according to the state's standards and procedures.

There are other businesses related to the shows, which also have contributed to their survival (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 135). Selling *Khon* masks and headdresses at major shopping areas is a business, which has been carried out since the beginning of The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe. Today, however, fewer masks and headdresses are sold at shopping areas, with most on display for sale solely at the theatre. Presently, most masks are only produced when a client places a special order.

A business selling souvenirs was begun during the period when the theatre was at the rental home. Previously, souvenirs were purchased from elsewhere, while currently at the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) all souvenirs are custom-made for the theatre itself, for example, tumblers, refrigerator magnets, notebooks, postcards, and E-cards. It is also possible for other vendors to place their items for sale at the theatre after they are scrutinised and approved by the theatre's management team.

Finally, the Nattayasala Restaurant is a new business inspired by the audiences. Audience members suggested that the theatre sell food and beverages for those who were waiting for the shows to begin. After much consideration, the Nattayasala Restaurant was opened. It is now located in the front of the theatre, offering Thai and international dishes from 4 to 12 pm.

Other funding support

As Thai theatrical puppetry is a national heritage art (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 114), various state and private organisations are willing to support the troupe's determination to sustain its existence in the Thailand. This support can be categorised into four groups (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 156).

Organisations granting continuous support to the theatre for its value to the country's art and culture, such as: the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Ministry of Culture. Other organisations supporting activities pertaining to publicising Thailand's culture and art to other countries offer both financial assistance and other help in facilitating the troupe when traveling abroad, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Thai Embassies in the country visited.

Major commercial sponsors include Thai Life Insurance Co., Ltd. and Singha Corporation Co., Ltd. Minor support for specific activities such as a tribute to Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod, are Siam Commercial Bank, Plc., The Government Lottery Office, Advance Info Service, Plc. (AIS) and Jim Thomson.

Royal patronage has also been an important source of subsidy (Virunrak, 2000, p. 95). The kings of Thailand and other members of the royal family have played a crucial role in helping Thai theatrical arts survive (Moungboon, 1996, p. 76). Their royal orders and personal favors provided support for Thai theatrical arts, especially the establishment of foundations under royal patronage, which continues to this day, helping to guarantee the survival of Thai theatrical arts.

Performance and organisational adaptation

Another important survival is the adaptation and development of the puppetry performances so that they are suitable for today's society. There are two ways in which Thai Puppet Theatre has adapted; through performance innovations and organisational change (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 170).

The former involves changes in terms of the components of the performance. The puppets employed at the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) today are well proportioned and relatively heavy. Each puppet is approximately 1-1.2 meters tall, and weighs around 2.5 kilograms. The clothing for the puppets is carefully crafted, and developed from the puppets employed in the Hun Luang shows. Rather than follow convention for Thai theatrical arts, the colours of the clothing have been modified under the direction of Ms. Sompit Yangkhiawsod. The puppets have also undergone changes in terms of the mechanism used to manipulate them, so that many more parts of their bodies are now movable (Navikamoon, 2004, p. 43). The number of puppets has increased, and can be grouped into the *Khon* characters, taken from those in the *Ramayana* stories, e.g. Hanuman and Rahu, the Thai characters, taken from Thai literature and used in stories, such as *Phra Aphai Manee*, modern characters created for such new stories as *The Overture*, and other miscellaneous characters created to give a special 'spice' to the stories and shows. These puppets include an Elvis Presley puppet and a vampire puppet (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 175).

The manipulation style in which three puppeteers control one puppet has been maintained. The male and female puppeteers are separated, with the male teams manipulating monkey warriors and demons and the female teams manipulating heroes and heroines (Posayakrit, 1986, p. 102). This gender separation was prescribed by Master Sakhon in the The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe and has been followed until the present. The manipulation techniques have been constantly perfected in order to ensure the graceful movements of the puppets. Rehearsals are held regularly, so that unity of the dances can be achieved.

The theatre where the Thai theatrical puppetry shows are held is enclosed. A professional light and sound system is employed to complement the shows. Inside is a stage, an audience seating area, dressing rooms for the puppeteers, a light and sound control room, and prop and setting equipment storage. There are more lighting and sound effects used at the current Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) than at the Joe Louis Theatre on Bangkok-Nonthaburi 12 Lane A team specialising in lighting is used, as well as live instead of pre-recorded music. More modern musical instruments are also employed for more realistic sound effects.

Due to the constant influx of international cultures into Thailand through television, radio, published sources, the Internet, and a westernised educational system, Thai theatrical arts have had to adjust accordingly. As described above in terms of staging, ideas, methods, and western styles are now applied in art forms that were previously exclusively Thai.

Both the stories and the scripts used in the shows at the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) have also been adapted. The *Khon* stories from *Ramayana* (Yupho, 1968, p. 30) were originally the main stories of Thai theatrical puppetry performances. Scripts were taken from the Fine Arts Department, and were adapted and shortened to match the puppetry performances. Nowadays, in order for the theatre to attract a larger audience through a more appropriate, modern style, the stories in the shows also include those taken from contemporary movies.

The art of acting from other forms of Thai theatrical shows has also been incorporated into performances. English is used so that foreign audiences can better understand the stories and the performance. The phases of the shows are systematically prescribed beginning with a short explanation of Thai theatrical puppetry, followed by a demonstration of *Khon* practice and manipulation, and finally, the performance itself.

In addition to these artistic adaptations, a profound understanding of business management is crucial for all Thai theatrical artists. With more competition both economically and in terms of the theatrical arts themselves, artists can better survive through the adoption of appropriate management systems to attract more clientele and maintain the existence of their organisation in the modern world (Jirajarupat, 2008, p. 200). With regard to Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) which has increased since the time of The Sakhon Nattasilp Hun Lakhon Lek Larn Kru Krae Troupe, the management style has adapted, becoming more professional, increasing the promotion of Thai theatrical puppetry, helping the theatre become more broadly known by other organisations in and outside the country. At present, Mr. Pisoot Yangkhiawsod is managing director and the director of the Management Division of the theatre, and is supervising the theatre with the assistance of his siblings, the children of Master Sakhon, who are in charge of other divisions.

As described through this paper, the path to the success of the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) has not been paved with roses. The

popularity of Thai theatrical puppetry may not be what it once was, but it is their hope that it will be preserved so that later generations can appreciate the beauty of our nation's art and culture through visiting the National Museum in Bangkok and by viewing the shows at the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (Joe Louis) at Suan Lum Night Bazaar.

Notes

¹ *Khon* is the form of Thai dance which the performer wears a *Khon* mask. This performance feature episodes from the *Ramakien*, the historical drama which originated in India.

² *Lakhon* describes story performance in Thailand. Dancers are usually female and perform as a group rather than representing individual characters.

³ *Fon ram* is the original Thai word to describe Thai folk dance.

⁴ *Rabam* is usually performed as a set dance in groups. This dance is becoming popular in Thailand for special occasions.

⁵ Joe Louis is the name of Master Sakhon Yangkhiawsod, the leader who revived the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre in Thai society.

⁶ *Hun krabok* are small-sized, bamboo rod puppets.

⁷ Likay is a popular Thai folk theatre form in which performers combine spoken text, dance, song, instrumental music, elaborate costuming, and buoyant staging techniques in an energetic all-night performance.

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