



The Role of Nang Narai in Thai Contemporary Dance “Narai Avatara”

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Abstract

This research aims to study the forms and the concepts in the creation of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”. Research methodology includes study of related documents, documentary data survey, interviews of experts and academics, seminars, information media, field surveys, and focus groups.

The research findings are as follows: Performance patterns feature new dramatic compositions based on the original story line and dance movements which come from various cultures but which place emphasis on the Thai identity. At the same time, the choreography, music, costumes, stage area, dancing art and visual arts, performers, as well as props have been created with the new generation taken into consideration. Dramatic creative concepts include reflection on women’s roles in Thai society, the conservation of Thai culture and traditions, use of symbols, application of theories of dance and visual arts. Also considered are the development of new concepts, cultural diversity, communication, variety in performances, ethics, and the new generation.

In addition to these findings, which were in accordance with the research objectives, this research found that the traditional role of Nang Narai followed classical Thai dance patterns, namely, the role of apsaras or goddesses, the role of intelligent women, and male-female roles. On the other hand, the new role of Nang Narai incorporates contemporary Thai dance patterns, recognizing the role of gender, values of the female gender, role of the female gender, and the male-female gender relations.

Key words: Nang Narai, Thai contemporary dance, Narai Avatara

Introduction

People’s familiarity with the role of Nang Narai in the Khon masked play and the play’s Thai dance patterns varies by era. The story of Nang Narai, which is based on the epic Ramayana, has it that Narayana, one of the most respected Hindu deities, disguises himself as a beauty to lure Nonthok, a demon, into following her dance movements and then into self-destruction in one incarnation, and after is reincar-

nated. As a play rendered in the style of Thai performing arts, the story is exciting and entertaining for people throughout Southeast Asia, and is influenced by the Indian culture. Additionally, it has stimulated discussion of the role of women in a variety of areas such as entertainment, society, and academics, and in particular allows people to see the importance of the role of women in Thai performing arts. In fact, stories about women have long been a major focus in

the performing arts all over the world. In this way, stories of women are universal and have always been internationally accepted.

The role of women is important to society on the whole. Considering choreographers in the west in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, it was found that a large number of dancers were women who wielded influence that could bring about changes in society. Among women artists presenting dancing arts with new characteristics, Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) was one of the pioneers of modern dance. Her performances differed from those such as the more orderly classical ballet. Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) was another creative woman who relied on performance influenced by eastern culture. She placed importance on breathing while basically moving her body along with dance movements and postures that might not be considered graceful, yet were fascinating nonetheless. With her dance partner, Charles Weidman (1901-1975), she developed dance techniques with distinct patterns of fall and recovery, motionlessness, and law of gravity. As can be seen in these examples, in the field of western dance, women played major roles in challenging the accepted concepts and their new concepts would become models benefiting future development the field of dance.

With the globalization of the present-day world, society is becoming increasingly interconnected. However, in many areas, there is still conflict centering around economics, politics, and culture, as well as continued disparity between races and genders.

The transition from a traditional society to a more modern society has seen the development of the concept of feminism. In less developed countries, women are still suppressed and are seen as like being the hind feet of elephants, which always need to follow the front feet, in this case, men. Issues in history, politics, religion, society, and culture, all have had an impact on the creation of art related to women, particularly in the performing arts. The works created in each era reflect different backgrounds and rationales

depending on the patterns, methods, and experiences of the creating artists which change with the trends in society and the world.

Considering the traditional dance performance and contemporary dance, any work that can reach out to the new generation and become acceptable obviously incorporates patterns and concepts that benefit society. Regarding the role of women as depicted in Thai contemporary dance, "Narai Avatara" by Naraphong Jarassri features several scenes with women issues prominent in each element of the performance, including the role of Nang Montho, Giantess Gaganasoon and Nang Narai as described earlier. In relation to the present thesis, this serves as an example of the changes in concepts, issues, and perspectives, as well as self-conduct, that are in line with the modern world. It also builds understanding and conveys concepts to the new generation so that they can access the art and culture of the old days as well as the contemporary version, seeing them fit together in harmony.

The role of Nang Narai as appears in Thai dance contains numerous interesting and exciting stories, especially where Nang Narai deceives Nonthok into dance along with her. This scene is very popular, as evidenced by the fact that it has been performed in Thai dance throughout the ages. The two main characters are involved in connecting events. The story also conveys ideas, perspectives, and philosophy to teach people how to behave properly and that inappropriate behavior will result in punishment as happens to Nonthok. Although the present-day performance is different from that of the past in certain ways, the changes in the performance patterns in each era are considered developments in Thai dance so that they are of sustainable value and can continue in modern times.

The performance of the contemporary dance "Narai Avatara" aims to promote understanding and appreciation of Thai dance among Thai people. The research and creation of new interpretations and meth-

ods is believed to contribute to the understanding of the value of that piece of work. The artists who create the work rely on new interpretations so that it is accepted among the younger generation and they can appreciate the value of Thai contemporary dance. In this way, the study of the role of Nang Narai in the “Narai Avatara” of Naraphong Jarassri is considered to enhance the value of Thai dance. It is also a medium for teaching and learning in the country. The researcher sees the importance of studying the patterns and concepts for the reworking of the role of Nang Narai in the performance of the contemporary “Narai Avatara.” The research results yield new academic information while preserving the art of Thai dance, enabling it to continue to be a part of Thai society in these days of globalization.

Objectives

1. To study the creative patterns of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”
2. To study the creative concepts of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

Research issues

In this thesis, “The role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance ‘Narai Avatara’,” the researcher has the objectives to study the role in the performance of Nang Narai as it appears in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara” of Naraphong Jarassri. This is to determine the patterns, the performance elements, and the creative concepts to see what original features are preserved. As a result, the research set out to study the following issues:

1. Performing script: creative concepts of performing script for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”
2. Choreography: concept designs of dance movements for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

3. Music: concept designs of sound and music for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

4. Costumes: concept designs of costumes for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

5. Stage: concept designs of stage for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

6. Dancing art and visual arts: concept designs of dancing art and visual arts for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

7. Performers: concept designs of performers for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”

8. Performing/acting props: concept designs of performing/acting props for the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara”.

Scope of Research

1. The study is specifically of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara” of Naraphong Jarassri, performed from the 2nd to the 4th of February, 2003, and excludes any other performances under the same title.

2. Only related data during the period from January 2003 to March 2013 was collected.

Preliminary agreement

In this thesis “The role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance ‘Narai Avatara’,” the researcher has as objectives to study and analyze the patterns, the performance elements, and the creative concepts of the performance of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance of Naraphong Jarassri, performed from the 2nd to the 4th of February 2011. A comparative study is made between the role of Nang Narai in the traditional performance and the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance “Narai Avatara.” The researcher has based the analysis on the principles of the Thai contemporary dance of

Naraphong Jarassri in conjunction with the background information regarding Nang Narai in traditional Thai dance, the concept of feminism, as well as the role of women in the context of Thai society with the aim to add to the appreciation of Thai dance.

Definition of particular terms

1. Role

The specific traits and identity of the character depicting the emotions, thoughts, feelings, and motivations, all of which affect the story's progression, problems, and climax, making it interesting and inviting for the audience

2. Nang Narai

A female character in the Thai contemporary dance "Narai Avatara", based on a part in the epic Ramayana, "Narayana subduing Nonthok", where Narayana disguises himself as an apsara and lures the demon Nonthok into following her dance movements leading towards self-destruction

3. "Narai Avatara"

The performance of the Thai contemporary dance of Naraphong Jarassri was inspired by the image in the "Narai-bantomsin" lintel, a carved stone work depicting the Narayana deity asleep on a great serpent called Phaya Naga Anantanagaraja, at Panomrung Historical Park, Buriram Province. In creating the performance, the concept and the story are taken from the literary work Ramayana, King Rama I version. All performers chosen are men, and the singers and musicians perform live, with the costume designs being inspired by Thai murals.

4. Thai contemporary dance

Thai contemporary dance created in the present day integrating Thai dancing art with dancing arts of various cultures of different times and ages, performed at the same time (Naraphong Jarassri, 2550: 13)

5. Patterns

Characteristics, types or styles of performance that can be specified as traditional, folk, or contemporary dance and that also perfectly convey the sto-

ries that artists would like to communicate to the audience

6. Concepts

Inspirations, methods, and concepts of artists used in creating their works reflect how they see each part of the performance. For this creation in particular, the entire concept is different from other works in general and has not been seen anywhere before. The focus is on developing the existing work into a new creation with its own identity.

Research tools

In conducting this study çThe role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance ùNarai Avataraù of Naraphong Jarassri,é the researcher has relied on the following research tools:

1. Documentary data collection

Data is collected from books, textbooks, and academic articles on issues regarding the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance "Narai Avatara", as well as interviews of experts, academics and the artists creating the work.

2. Interviews of experts and academics

Interviews of those knowledgeable of the performance of the role of Nang Narai in the Thai contemporary dance "Narai Avatara" and group interviews

3. Seminars

The researcher has participated in the first and the second seminar projects on the establishment of standards in celebrating model dance artists, regarding related knowledge issues.

4. Other information media

Studies of other information media relevant to the performance of the Thai contemporary dance "Narai Avatara" of Naraphong Jarassri and the performances of Thai contemporary dance both in Thailand and abroad.

5. Field data collection

Field data was collected with the use of questionnaires, surveying the opinions of the audience at-

tending the thesis work projects of creative dancing art work for ethics in educational institutes on 31 January 2013 and on 1 February 2013, at the Department of Dance, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

6. Criteria for recognizing model artists of Chulalongkorn University

The researcher studies the criteria for recognizing model artists of Chulalongkorn University of Witchuta Wuthathit and the second group of students in the Ph.D. in Arts program, Department of Thai Dance, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Then an analysis was done to compile the qualifications of model artists pioneering Thai contemporary dance.

Expected benefits

1. To develop new approaches in the performance of the role of Nang Narai in Thai contemporary dance
2. To develop creative concepts for the role of Nang Narai in the performance of Thai contemporary dance related to the role of women in the context of Thai society

Results

The performance of the Ramayana started with shadow plays, Khon masked drama, and conventional plays and has been carried on since the late Ayuthaya period. Then when the Rattanakosin period was established, King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty commanded that literature for the Khon masked drama be collected so that it would not be lost and so that it would be performed for the public morale. The play Ramayana that King Rama I authored in that era is considered a complete version with all content and stories. It was his goal to collect all the traditional stories from the time of the collapse of the Ayuthaya city in 1767 as a literary legacy for the country. Later in the reign of King Rama IV, there was a prelude performance of “Narayana subduing Nonthok,” a

work penned by King Rama IV. The performance patterns from then on are still largely in accordance with conventions but certain developments and adjustments have been made to suit contemporary times.

The performance of “Narayana subduing Nonthok” is a prelude to the feature Khon masked play. The story tells of the avatar of Narayana in order to conquer tribulations according to the texts on “the ten incarnations of Narayana.” The incarnation of Narayana as an apsara is the ninth, titled “deva apsara avatareé and çapsara avatara”. The story goes that a demon was condemned by Shiva to guard the entrance of Kailas Mount, Shiva’s abode, and had the duty to wash the feet of those devas visiting Shiva. The demon’s name is Nonthok.

Narayana subduing Nonthok is a short Khon masked play performed as a prelude. The performance of this story has been passed on from the reign of King Rama IV. The Department of Fine Arts has presented performances of Khon masked plays where performers dance interpreting the script and conversing along with the oboe-based Thai orchestra. The major costumes are based on those of ancient kings. With a variety of patterns in dance at present, the performance has been developed into one of Thai contemporary dance.

The research findings reveal that the patterns of performance include performing script, choreography, music, costumes, stage, dancing art and visual arts, performers, and props. The creative concepts include reflections of the role of women in Thai society, the conservation of Thai culture and customs, use of symbols, application of dance and visual arts theories, consideration of new creations in performances, depiction of cultural diversity, communication of various kinds of performances, virtues, and the new generation. In addition, the researcher has added to existing knowledge as follows. The role of Nang Narai in the original version consists of the role of apsara, the role of beautiful and intelligent women and the role of male-female gender relations. Meanwhile, the

role of Nang Narai in the new version consists of the celebrated role of the female gender, the role of gender, the role of women and the role of male-female gender relations. Therefore, the female gender is not only a symbol of attraction for the male gender. It

can be seen that the role of Nang Narai in both versions reflects the intelligence of females, who provide intelligent solutions to problems by relying on both beauty and wisdom to bring peace and serenity to the world.

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