

**Dancing into the Heart of Darkness: Modern Variations and Innovations of the
Thai Shadow Theatre**
by Kevin Brown

In most of the countries in Southeast Asia, shadow theatre is a traditional, rural form of entertainment. In the big cities, Western forms of media entertainment like movies or television have, for the most part, taken the place of traditional art forms. In contrast, the traditional shadow theatre of Thailand, the *nang*, has been transformed into a new form of popular entertainment. Another distinctive aspect of Thai shadow theatre is that there are two traditional forms of shadow play. This is very unlike the majority of countries in Southeast Asia that practice one form of shadow theatre in each country. In Thailand, the oldest form of shadow theatre, more closely connected to the court tradition, is called *nang yai*. A more recent form, arising from Thai popular tradition, is called *nang talung*. Modern shadow performances often incorporate one or both of these forms, using traditional elements juxtaposed with modern elements. Commonly, these traditional forms are referred to collectively as *nang booraan* (ancient nang), while modern forms are referred to a *nang samai* (modern nang) (Dowsey-Magog 186). Modern shadow plays have combined traditional *nang* with elements of contemporary popular culture. More than any other influence, modern shadow plays have been transformed by the acculturation of Western movies and television. Paradoxically, many new innovations have arisen as an attempt to preserve the traditional art forms of Thailand in the face of this cultural onslaught. As an example, I will conclude with a case study of the work of Pornrat Damrhung, an Assistant Professor of Drama at

Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, who is attempting to preserve these ancient forms through innovations she has designed primarily with education in mind.

Nang Yai

The *nang yai* of Central Thailand is perhaps one of the oldest traditional forms of shadow play in the world. In 1932, Thailand became a democracy as the King of Thailand ceded power to a constitutional monarchy. Thus, while the King stayed on as a figurehead. Many traditional court practices ceased to exist when political power was handed over to a legislative governing body. Before this event, the Crown Princes of Thailand used to choose a village to mount a *nang yai* performance for occasions such as funerals or wedding celebrations. Unfortunately, because *nang yai* had close ties to the royal court, it has been in decline. Now, it is an "almost defunct" art form (Dowsey-Magog 190). The word *yai* means "big," and the puppets are approximately life-sized figures often more than one or two meters wide. The word *nang* means "cowhide," the most common material of construction. Occasionally, puppets are also made of tiger or bear skin (Bridhyakorn 8). Each leather puppet is incised with a pattern, often an entire scene with several characters (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 65). Although performances usually take place at night, the puppets will often be colored with plant or mineral extracts such as sandalwood, lime, copper sulfate, and soot (Bridhyakorn 7). A traditional ensemble consists of ten dancers, two narrators and ten musicians (Brandon *Cambridge Guide* 244). The dancers carry the large puppets while dancing in front of and behind a large screen, approximately ten feet high and thirty feet long (Brandon *Cambridge Guide* 236). Stories told in the *nang yai* are from the *Ramakien*, the Thai adaptation of the Indian *Ramayana*. It is interesting to note that the dance steps of the *nang yai* greatly

influenced the later development of the traditional Thai court dance, the *Khon* (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 65). When dancing is the primary feature of the performance, the performance is called *nang ram*. This particular type of performance is a more recent innovation. This variation uses more brightly colored puppets during the day, typically as a prelude to a performance of *nang yai* (Bridhyakorn 14). Some scholars maintain that shadow theatre came to Thailand from India. This is improbable given that the first official record of the form is 1458, and shadow theatre did not appear in India until the 17th or 18th century (Broman 3). According to James Brandon, a form resembling *nang yai* may have appeared as early as the 9th century, possibly coming to Thailand through Cambodia from Java (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 65).

Nang Talung

In contrast, the popular *nang talung* of Southern Thailand gets its name from a shortening of "Pattalung," the southern province of Thailand where shadow play is very popular (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 68). In this form, a single puppeteer, called a *nang nai* manipulates several puppets behind a small screen (Brandon *Cambridge Guide* 240). In addition to the *nai nang*, there are approximately eight to ten assistants and musicians, traditionally all male (Broman 18). Five musicians accompany the puppeteer (Brandon *Cambridge Guide* 244) playing traditional *lakon jatri* music (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 129). *Nang talung* puppets are much smaller than *nang yai* puppets, typically between one and three feet tall. In contrast to the static scenes depicted in the *nang yai* puppets, *nang talung* puppets are articulated to allow movement at the arm and mouth. These puppets are also made of cowhide, but the hides selected are much thinner in order to make them somewhat transparent. They are then colored with materials such as rust, lime, or Chinese

ink (Broman 7). *Nang talung* uses stories from the *Ramakien*, but it also incorporates stories from Buddhist *Jataka* tales (Broman 23). Perhaps due to the smaller size and translucency of the puppets, many scholars agree that *nang talung* is probably of Chinese influence, and appeared in Thailand some time during the 17th or 18th centuries (Broman 4). This form is also similar to traditions that exist today in the neighboring countries of Laos and Malaysia (Damrhung). Because of its root as a form of popular entertainment, traditional elements of *nang talung* are probably employed more often in *nang talung* than in the court entertainment *nang yai*.

Modern Variations: Nang Samai

Nonetheless, modern shadow play, or *nang samai*, employs a variety of elements from traditional *nang yai* and *nang talung*. There are generally two types of practitioners of *nang samai*. The first type is a practitioner of *nang talung*, who has updated his show with modern embellishments. Many more "conservative" *nang nai* bemoan the encroachment of modernism. Nang Liam, a traditional, conservative practitioner of *nang* explains, "In times before, *nang talung* was more correct. Kings were kings, *nai* were *nai*, *phrai* were *phrai*, women were women, and men were men" (qtd. in Dowsey-Magog 195) complains. Another traditional *nai*, Nang Sunthorn complains, "I don't like it. Now people like the clowns to sing, they like puppets dresses in modern clothes...it has town people and clowns all mixed up. Now the clown sings in front of the king" (Dowsey-Magog 195). The majority of the modern innovations are felt necessary because of the relatively recent arrival of the Western media in Thailand. Often the characters speak more rapidly in a modern show, as one villager observes "just like the movies" (qtd. in Dowsey-Magog 191). In fact, the Thai are so fond of comparing shadow plays to the

movies, that the word *nang* is also used as the word for "movie," because movies are thought of as a shadow projected on a screen.

The second type of practitioner of modern *nang* is a performer specializing in some other form of modern performance that, either through a collaboration or a deliberate attempt to revive traditional Thai forms, has incorporated elements from *nang yai* and/or *nang talung* into their work.

Modern Innovations: Puppets

Many of the modern innovations to this art form involve the construction techniques used to create *nang* puppets. Traditionally the making of puppets was considered a highly spiritually charged endeavor, only carried out by holy men. In *nang yai* a single puppet is so large that it takes an entire cow to make one puppet. A puppet maker will choose the specific animal to be slaughtered depending on the eventual color, shape, and character of the puppet (Damrhung). For example, a *rishi* (hermit) character can only be made from a virgin cow (Bridhyakorn 8). Even harder to find, the puppets for the heroes Phra Ram and Phra Lak can only be made from the hide of a buffalo that either died in labor or was killed by a tiger (Moran 2003). In modern times, this ritual connection is often lost. Some modern puppets are made out of plastic instead of cowhide (Damrhung). Ordinary paint is used instead of natural pigments made from plants and minerals (Broman 7). One company has contacted the Thailand Department of Export Promotion to market *nang talung* puppets to a global market. Although it may sound at first like an act of exploitation, the plan actually arose out of an attempt at cultural preservation. The Muang Taskin Preservation and Publicity Association is a group of 19

nang talung puppet makers and artists who want to sell puppets to the world in order to raise money to build a *nang* theatre on the resort island of Patong Beach (Theparat 1).

Modern Innovations: Sound

Another major change in the performance of shadow plays is seen in the sound of a typical show. Ancient *nang talung* music came from traditional court styles and instrumentation, "a mixed ensemble of *lakon jatri* instruments plus *pi phat* melody and percussion instruments...as well as plucked and bowed string instruments from the Chinese group" (Brandon *Southeast Asia* 129). Traditional instruments such as gongs and finger cymbals now play side by side with modern instruments such as saxophones, electronic keyboards and electric guitars. Traditional songs are now replaced with a wide variety of up-tempo modern music, from music used in Thai boxing matches to themes from popular television programs. In traditional performances, the language was mostly traditional verse poetry occasionally interrupted by prose dialogue. Today, verse poetry takes a secondary role to extensive dialog (Dowsey-Magog 191). Electronic amplification is usually employed. Often, tape recorders play major parts of the dialog and music (Broman 17). "Electric lights, microphones, and loudspeakers are standard equipment" (Dowsey-Magog 204). Overall the sound of modern *nang* is informed by the "now often familiar...rapid tempo of the electronic media (Dowsey-Magog 191).

Modern Innovations: Vision

Similar innovations can be seen in the visual aspects of a modern shadow play. The screen of the shadow play is one primary feature of these performances that has seen considerable change. A traditional *nang yai* screen "is made of a thin piece of white cloth in the middle with double pieces at either side...the screen is duly decorated on either side

with colored cloth" (Bridhyakorn 8). Today screens are not so subdued, they are highly decorated with everything from advertisement such as Pepsi slogans, the names of rock bands, or even the names of politicians (Dowsey-Magog 196). In terms of staging, what was typically a temporary and crudely built performance hut, or *rong nang*, is often replaced with a permanent building (Broman 16).

Lighting that was formerly provided by a kerosene lamp is now provided by electrical lighting equipment (Broman 17). Computers are even employed to run some shows, including the latest global innovations in electronic staging and lighting technology (Damrhung). Other visual elements have been influenced by elements of the Western media. In traditional *nang talung*, a *nang nai* rarely employs more than three or four puppets at a time. Today, it is not uncommon for a modern popular performer to use eight or more puppets in one scene. This results in much more rapid flow of action on and off of the screen (Dowsey-Magog 193-194). Overall, these visual elements can be seen as an attempt to emulate the techniques of the modern cinema. "The visual enactment of *nang talung* appears to be developing toward a more realistic depiction of action by imitating the conventions of television and the movies" (Dowsey-Magog 194).

Modern Innovations: Themes, Plots, and Characters

Modern themes encroach on the traditional stories of *nang booraan*. Stories from the Ramayana are used, but they are seen to be a "key" to other important themes closer to urban daily life (Damrhung). Stories are often written by a *nang nai* or a member of the company. Other stories are lifted from the plots of modern novels, movies, and television shows including romances, mysteries, and Westerns. Some new characters come directly from movies and television, such as "cowboy," "gangster," and "terrorist"

(Broman 9). New puppet props have appeared, such as "gun," "cigarette," and "cell phone" (Dowsey-Magog 187). Often the performances allude to current economic, social, and political events (Broman 23). Usually, the occasion of a performance dictates the subject matter. Siri Buakoes, a member of a *nang talung* performance group, states: "If we are dealing with a politician, the sung part of our performance has to allude to the local political situation...if the person who hires us is, say, a teacher, we can praise teachers" (qtd. in Sukphisit 1). Thus, the modern *nang nai* has to keep up with what is going on in the world at large. "This means that *nang talung* performers have to read the papers and always keep up with current events" (qtd. in Sukphisit 1). Another trend that is worthy of note is the way in which the Thai government has seized upon the *nang* as a way to propagate cultural change (Damrhung). To this end, performances promoted by the Ministry of Education have promoted themes such as nationalism, social ideals, laws, and even to spread messages about safe sex.

Case Study

A very interesting case study in innovation for the sake of preservation, is the work of Pornrat Damrhung, an Assistant Professor of Drama at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. For the past several years, she has been traveling to remote villages of Thailand to study traditional forms of *nang*. Damrhung conducts workshops for children and adults, in Thailand as well as abroad. In these workshops, elements of *nang yai*, *nang talung*, *khon* masked dance, and some elements of free-form dance are combined together in an open expressive form. Damrhung muses: "Actually, I am more like The Muppet Show" (Damrhung).

I was very fortunate to participate in one of these workshops in the United States. Over a week long period, students were instructed to create original performances of stories from the *Ramakien* using original *nang talung* puppets, paper cut-outs of *nang yai* puppets, and paper cut-outs of *khon* masks. Students were encouraged to bring other modes of expression including elements of free form dance and by creating their own modern "puppets" out of sheets of colored plastic and construction paper. The results were often surprising, but seemed to flow forth seamlessly from the combination of traditional forms. Some of these surprises included a rotating multi-colored lotus flower and silhouettes cast by the bodies of male and female performers.

Professor Damrhung has also integrated traditional forms into her own theatrical performances. "If you are in contemporary theatre, which I am, you tend to use a lot of traditional elements, so I start with traditional elements" (Damrhung). Damrhung traveled to a remote village in Thailand, and was able to borrow a *nang yai* puppet, loaned to her from monks at a temple. She used the puppet in a modern performance about a wife who tries to rescue her dead husband from the lord of the dead. "I used two kinds of movement...The lord of the dead used traditional dance, masked dance, and the alive woman used modern dance. So you see they are juxtaposed in the same scene" (Damrhung).

"If it hurt – that good!" Her broken English and diminutive stature cannot take anything away from the heart and passion that she has for her work. Her name is Pornrat Damrhung, and she is an associate professor of theatre from Bangkok, Thailand. Her nickname is "Oui," pronounced like the French word for "yes." She explains that her

father gave her the nickname when she was a little girl, after the sound of a tiny bird.

“You can also spell it ‘We,’ but it is better to say ‘yes’ than ‘no.’”

Oui is an artistic missionary. Her mission is to preserve the traditional art forms of Thailand. She carries out this mission by traveling to the remote villages of Thailand, in an attempt to preserve the last remnants of a dying art form. This form is called *nang yai*, which means “big shadow puppets.” She then brings this knowledge back to the cities, and conducts workshops with students. Although most of her students are children in Thailand, Oui also does workshops with adults, and occasionally travels out of her country to bring the *nang* to the rest of the world.

“If you feel pain, that is your body talking.” The first day of the workshop my body and I were having a rather animated conversation. Actually, it was more like a full-blown argument, and my body was winning. The stretches she showed us seemed to be a mixture of martial arts and yoga. I remembered doing some of the same stretches in a Karate class that I took in college, and I recognized the “cat” pose from a yoga class that I took at the “Y.” I was beginning to get the idea that Thai shadow puppets must somehow be much different from the other *wayang* forms that we had learned about in class.

It is the sheer physicality of the form that surprised me the most. The descriptions I had read of *nang yai* seemed to imply that it was a static art form. Somehow I thought that these “big” puppets, often containing a complete scene in themselves, must be subdued and a bit boring when compared to the three dimensional, lively *wayang* forms. Through experience, I soon learned that this is perhaps the most physical, the most energized of all of the southeast Asian shadow forms. This is because *nang yai* combines

puppets with elements of traditional Thai dance. Puppeteers must also be dancers, and commonly appear in front of the screen with their puppets, unheard of in other shadow forms.

Oui's workshop combined elements of *nang yai* with two other traditional art forms: the *nang talung*, or "small shadow puppets" and the *Khon* masked dance. This is perhaps the most innovative part of the workshop. Oui calls this modern combination of forms *nang samai*, or "modern shadow puppets." Over the several day workshop, we were divided into three groups. Each group was asked to create three short performances based on stories from the Ramayana. The final product would be a combined performance created through a collaboration of the three groups. At our disposal were *nang yai* (big shadow puppets), *nang talung* (small shadow puppets), and traditional masks from the *Khon* dance, literally photocopied out of a book by Oui. Her methods are innovative, practical, and sometimes just downright pragmatic.

Periodically, Oui would check in on each group's progress. At one point we were having trouble figuring out what a lotus flower looked like. Oui grabbed my notebook and scribbled several versions of the lotus flower: from above, from the side, in bloom, and in bud. Oui would mingle from group to group, occasionally stopping to demonstrate a dance move or suggest choreography. She would demonstrate conventional ways of portraying events such as courtship, marriage, or abduction.

At first our group struggled to grasp the big, expansive ideas contained in this mythic text. We found that we had to concentrate on just the essential actions contained in the stories. Once we did this, our task became much easier. It would have been great to

have had several more days, weeks, or even months to perfect our performances.

Nevertheless, we did the best that we could, given the time available.

The day of the performance came all too quickly. Our group was still discussing the cues and cutting the script, literally up to the moment that the show started. Nevertheless, the performance was pure joy! Only through an experience such as this can one come to appreciate what a traditional performance might be like. Amidst the confusion there are strange moments of clarity and connection with the audience. At one point, one of the members from another group moved one of the puppets we were about to need. Momentary chaos ensued.

I have read that during traditional shadow performances, a *dalang* may stop performing for several minutes to find the right puppet or just to light a cigarette. These performances often last many hours, into the wee hours of the morning. Because our performance was only half an hour, our momentary lapse to find the missing puppet must have been quite noticeable to the audience.

Still, it was one of those strange moments of clarity, a moment of realization about the true nature of an art form. It was this momentary lapse, a puppet misplaced, that brought to me new meaning, and a more complete understanding of the *nang*. It is an art form that itself is an approximation, a reflection of the divinities. No human performance can be as perfect as the gods in their truest form. Therefore, a shadow performance is a type of play in which the shadows are just that - the shadows of the gods, an imperfect approximation of the divine.

Conclusion

Ironically, the future of the *nang* shadow plays of Thailand may depend on their ability to adapt to the cultural influence exerted by Western media forms, namely movies and television. Samai Saengcharoen, 72, is the last member of a dying breed, a traditional practitioner of *nang talung*. "Most of the puppet masters are getting too old to continue. They can no longer play on stage because shadow puppetry requires a lot of strength to maneuver the puppets (qtd. in Trakullertsathien 1). An even more rare individual, Weera Meemuan, 53, is a performer of traditional *nang yai*. He laments, "I am not sure what the future holds. I am one of the last performers of this form of puppetry" (qtd. in Yin nopgcit). If not facing complete extinction, the traditional art forms of Thailand are at least facing a period of rapid change and adaptation. The question in years to come will be how modern innovations effect traditional forms. Will these changes obliterate the traditional *nang*, as many traditional practitioners fear, or will these changes somehow preserve the traditional forms? These are the same issues that face the theatre of the Western world, as similar pressures are exerted on pure theatrical forms to adapt to the pace and visual spectacle of movies and television. Perhaps in contrast to Western theatre, the shadow theatre has to its advantage the fact that it is already a form of purely visual media.

Unlike the Western theatre, in shadow theatre, the presence of the human body on a stage is deemphasized and obscured. At the very least, one can see the performances of shadows on a screen are as once removed from the presence of the human body that is manipulating the images on the screen. This is very similar to the way that cinema and television do not rely on the presence of a human actor. For the most part, traditional Western theatrical forms are centered on the presence of the human actor. Because of

this, the cultural forces exerted by the Western media do more damage, in a cultural sense, to forms of theatre that primarily rely on the presence of the human actor. One could go so far as to say that actor-centered forms are more subject to appropriation by the media. That is, in a culture becoming more accustomed to movies and television, the presence of an actor on a screen becomes stronger and more available to an audience than the presence of an actor on a stage. In Thailand, the shadow theatre is already a form that happens on screen, not on a stage. The "actors" of the shadow theatre do not rely on presence in the same way that the actors of the Western stage rely on presence.

Due to this fact, the Western media may not be as potent of an antagonist towards the shadow theatre as it is toward the Western theatre. Appropriation is not a factor because Thai culture is already accustomed to viewing theatre on a screen. The Western media is not able to appropriate the shadow theatre because it is the Western media that has been, in turn, appropriated to serve the purposes of the shadow theatre. If this theory holds true, perhaps the modern innovations that have been brought to these traditional art forms will preserve rather than destroy. Rather than becoming another victim of appropriation in the current trend of globalization, perhaps the shadows will reign again.

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This is about the image

(photos taken by the author of carvings from his collection).

"Nang talung' design hand cut and hand painted on cow hide."