

STIFTELSEN MARIONETTMUSEET, STOCKHOLM

**NUMBER THREE OF THREE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES ABOUT ASIAN PUPPET THEATRE:  
THAILAND 2005, BURMA 2007, INDIA, THAILAND, CAMBODIA 2010**

**BRIEF NARRATIVE ACCOUNT FROM SEPTEMBER 2010**

## **INDIA – THAILAND – CAMBODIA**

**Report of activities 2010 within the three year project  
"International Promotion of Threatened Traditions in Asia"  
made possible thanks to the support Barbro Oshers Pro Suecia Foundation.**

### **INDIA**

A major cultural exchange between Sweden and India took place in New Delhi February 15, 16 and 17, 2010.

This was the third year of the Marionette Museum Foundation's project promoting Asian puppetry traditions, the first two parts, also within the Pro Suecia Foundation grant, had been realised and reported on in 2008 and 2009.

India, not being a country but a continent, has an enormous variety of puppet theatre traditions and very different conditions for these to survive. Cultural policy in India embraces more attention and initiatives to performing arts, including puppetry, than in most other Asian countries. Knowing this from previous decades of intense cultural cooperation and before imposing Western ideas, we consulted India's foremost active puppet theatre director, Dadi Pudumjee, leader of the "Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust" in New Delhi.

Contact existed with Dadi Pudumjee since he visited Sweden in 1972 as a member of the Darpana Puppet Theatre Company of Meher Contractor from Ahmedabad. In the seventies, he became a guest student at Marionetteatern in Stockholm. He then was a co-founder of UNIMA-India. Years later he became its president. In 2008 he was elected president of the world organisation UNIMA, Union Internationale de la Marionette.

Dadi suggested that a seminar with the theme of dramaturgy would be useful since many questions related to this subject often arise among Indian puppeteers. In response to this request I outlined a preliminary programme, including theory and practical exercises:

*The Delhi programme is ambitious. Firstly, we would like to raise basic questions, essential to the theme of dramaturgy. Secondly, we try to formulate answers. There is a need to establish a kind of vocabulary on what we mean when we talk dramaturgy, in order to speak the same language.*

*Although many issues and problems are similar in all cultures, we must pay attention and respect to the differences that also exist, to avoid speaking over each others' heads.*

*There will be a theoretical, analytical introduction to the theme. The introduction will be followed by practical activation of the participants through exercises in story writing and puppet manipulation.*

*That means to concretely practice the power, the utilisation, of written texts, while interpreting them with puppets.*

*The manipulation techniques are string puppets (marionettes) and Japanese bunraku style.*

*Examples of questions to analyse:*

*Why telling a story?*

*What is quality in storytelling and performing?*

*Differences between actor and puppet*

*The use of plays written for actors as opposed to special writing for puppetry*

*How to adapt without destroying the original?*

*Proceeding from a text to a vision to a performance*

*The theoretical parts illustrated by excerpts from puppet shows on CD*

From Stockholm, we emphasized the importance of offering this seminar to all Indian regions. Should distant participants have financial problems with travel fees, we would help.

The dates were finalised to February 15, 16 and 17, 2010.

For supplementary support from Indian local institutions, Dadi composed a group of partners.

The seminar dates coincided with the International Puppet Theatre Festival organised by Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust. Thus, the seminar was included in the festival **Annex 1**.

Other partners were the national UNIMA centre (President Ranjana Pandey and Secretary Anurupa Roy, another former student in Sweden), the Sanget Natak Akademi and the Theatre Crafts Museum (director Usha Malik). The gatherings were housed at this Crafts Museum.

Interest among Indian puppeteers to attend the seminar was surprisingly great. In total, some forty persons from eight states registered and also some foreign observers from USA and Canada participated.

At the start of the seminar Dr Kapila Vatsyayan appeared, who, among many other qualities, is a constant protector of puppetry and internationalism, former founder of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, now Head of India International Centre.

## **Annex 2, Participants with geographical overlook**

As an opening lecture, I presented an exhaustive definition of the word dramaturgy - from Western aspects as well as from Asians, why dramaturgy is needed, differences between dramaturgy for puppets and actors, how to read dramatic texts, the written words and their layers of meaning. Especially, I emphasised the importance of *movement* for giving life to dead material and if, when and how movements can replace words.

Thereafter followed a practical text analysis. Two simple “dramatic” text fragments, *The Encounter* and *Enemies*, were handed out in English and translated into Hindi. **Annex 3**

To interpret those texts in terms of action we had brought puppets from Sweden but also the students own puppets were used. There were no complexes amongst these students but lively questioning. As an example, see the intriguing question a young man wrote on a piece of paper **Annex 4**.

It soon became clear that the gathering fulfilled a deeply felt need for communication, not only between the participants and us teachers (Professor Michael Meschke and Curator Elisabeth Meschke) but perhaps even more between the participants themselves, especially those from outside New Delhi. In spite of their diversity and social differences they seemed to

greatly appreciate personal communication. There was opportunity and time to present their activities and puppets. Some persons unwrapped puppets carried a long way (for example from Kerala by the sons of the late great performer and priest Krishnankutty Pulavar). Others gave small performances from their repertory, for example from Orissa, showing flat puppets against a sunny wall in the courtyard of the premises. What they all seemed to share, in spite of such different origins, was a sense of pride in their profession. They did not need – as is often the case in certain so-called developing countries – to hear from Westerners that their art is valuable.

At the end of this seminar all participants were given a certificate. **Annex 5**

On February 27, 2010, in a letter, Dadi Pudumjee confirmed the success of the seminar and expressed satisfaction and thanks from all involved **Annex 6**

Financial contributions were given from our sources as follows:

For travel fees for distant participants, distributed through Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust:  
25,000 Rupees

For preparation, information and organisation of the event by UNIMA-India: 17,000 Rupees

For premises and services by the Theatre Crafts Museum: 4,000 Rupees.

For a scholarship to a young Indian artist, Mr Mohammed Shameem of New Delhi, as contribution to studies abroad: ca. 58,000 Rupees.

Further we provided the national Sangeet Natak Akademy with international literature on puppet theatre and related arts, which we had brought from Sweden.



## THAILAND

There has been intense cultural cooperation since the 1970s, between Sweden (through the Stockholm Marionette Theatre) and Thailand (through the Thammasat University of Bangkok) For this, particular thanks are owed to Dr Kusuma Venzky-Stalling, an expert theatre teacher and Thailand's leading promoter of puppetry arts and international cultural exchange, now living in Chiang Mai.

In 2008, we had together realised the Nang Yai project (support to a threatened art) in the framework of the cultural exchange programme supported by the Pro Suecia Foundation. But there was still a hole to fill.

Another teacher at Thammasat University, Mrs. Somporn Fourrage, a unique mime artist trained in France, who was also a former artistic collaborator of ours, was trying to publish an important book for Thailand, namely an overlook and presentations on several stage arts, such as modern mime (as she had learnt from French master Etienne Decroux) and puppet theatre (with references to Sweden, etc.). The book is called *MIME* with one particular chapter named "Mime in marionettes." Some financial help seemed called for, and in a letter of thanks

**Annex 7** Somporn Fourrage wrote: "*Your funding ... should enable me to distribute the book to approximately 100 libraries*": a quite satisfactory result for our support.

Having Bangkok as a base for our journeys to India and Cambodia, we used the stay to reinforce our Thai contacts, for example with SEAMEO-SPAFA, the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, which had published articles by Michael Meschke and would like to get new ones. Another contact person is Mr. Jörg Schönning, the representative in South East Asia of SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, an organisation that has strongly encouraged earlier initiatives of our Foundation in the region.

## CAMBODIA

The reason for including Cambodia in the research programme on threatened traditions was the fact that there existed (or still exists) an almost unique form of puppet theatre with giant leather puppets called Sbek Thom. Those questions motivated a journey to Phnom Penh together with Dr. Kusuma, joining us from Chiang Mai. She had prepared the journey through her Cambodian contacts.

It was impossible not to be impressed by the very special atmosphere in the country due to its recent political history, the Pol Pot dictatorship, its fall and twenty years of painful efforts to reconstruct a civil society.

In spite of the presence of frightening memories from the past, it was possible to lay the foundation for future cultural cooperation.

Dr. Sam-Ang Sam, a university professor, assistant to the Minister of culture and composer, received us generously, organising useful encounters, such as a speech and a workshop on February 5<sup>th</sup> at the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Humanities of the Pannasastra University of Cambodia, where I presented Puppetry Traditions of Asia and Europe. **Annex 8**





Around thirty students including a few Buddhist monks attended the workshop. On this occasion it was determined that two particularly interested students, Mr. Mang Sohan and Mr. Bann Chhun, would try to establish a complete and actual overview of the still active Sbek Thom players in the country.

A most rewarding encounter was a visit to the Sovanna Phum Arts Association in Phnom Penh and its president, theatre director Mann Kosal. This is both a theatre and a recognised institution, which gives regular performances and offers workshops in classical dance, drum, circus and shadow play. We knew that this artist and his colleagues had and still have considerable difficulties of economic – though perhaps also of a political kind – but witnessed a performance “The Dragon Arrow,” which achieved a high, artistic professional level in spite of the fact that the skilful players-dancers were students from the Royal University of Fine Arts. There was a genuine connection in the show with the ancient religious sources from which most stage arts come. Before the “show” started, the players gathered in two groups, their backs to the audience, in front of a pyramid-like mountain of masks similar to Thai Kohn masks. Obviously it was a moment of prayer and devotion.

Then each player lifted a mask and left stage, returning to dance with the mask on. Mr. Mann Kosal himself, a dynamic and respected stage director and storyteller, offered a fusion of tradition and renewal: there were Sbek Thom shadows mixed with dancers and contemporary experimentation (for example in the way the puppets were moved), giving new dimensions to the ancient technique.



It was not possible to see a performance of Sbek Thom in the capital. Most companies were said to live in and around Siem Reap. And there is an impressive number of national and private cultural institutions dedicated to the national cultural heritage and its transfer to new generations, such as for example the Sala Kanseing Sbek Thom Troupe or the CDCAPK, Centre de développement culturel des arts populaires Khmer.

An interesting parallel exists between the Thai boys at Wat Ban Don being trained to perform Nang Yai shadow puppet theatre and the training at CDCAPK of young Cambodian orphans to perform Sbek Toch, a smaller size form of Sbek Thom.

Dr. Sam also arranged a very exclusive meeting with Mr. Pich Tum Kravel, a foremost honourable Cambodian personality, now living in a remote countryside. Before the dictatorship he was a renowned actor. Later on he became a scholar on Cambodian stage arts and is still active as lecturer and author, for example of the book *Colour Leather And Shadow Puppet*.

Today Mr. Pich Tum Kravel has a minister's rank and is a highly respected advisor to the present Cambodian government.

The interview with him provided valuable knowledge about traditional Cambodian stage arts and culture before and after the Pol Pot regime, for example about a curious form of leather-puppet, the coloured Sbaek Por: these puppets are performed during daytime, as opposed to the great leather shadows performed at night.

Our conversation was recorded and constitutes a precious source of documentation.

Further reference: [www.culturalprofiles.net/Cambodia/Directories](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Cambodia/Directories)

Leaving the country we strongly felt that there would be a lot to do in terms of establishing cultural exchange with Cambodia. It would be particularly interesting to help presenting the art of Sbek Thom to the West.



*Mr. Pich Tum Kravel watching Michael Meschke's puppets*

**Three years of activities, which could not have been done without the support of the Pro Suecia Foundation, come to an end. A considerable number of persons, interested and/or participating, in Sweden and Asian countries have been touched by the actions we started with modest ambitions. The little we could do for others has been generously rewarded by how others have enriched our knowledge and insights in human nature. Much more, of course, could and should be done to promote understanding between East and West. But at this point we like to express our strongly felt gratitude towards Barbro Osher and her Foundation for giving us the opportunity to help realise our dreams.**

Stockholm, September 2010  
Michael Meschke

Photo: Elisabeth Beijer Meschke