

# Reinterpreting Performing Arts for the 21st Century

*in Reference to the Narai Avatara  
Performance*

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## Abstract

This article aims to share insights gained about how traditional arts and heritage can be reinterpreted through creative performing arts to keep them vibrant in 21st century urban life. Drawn from a dissertation length piece of research: 'Reinterpreting Performing Arts for the 21st Century in Reference to the Narai Avatara Performance.' The practice-based research on which this article is based was conducted in the context of selected urban areas in Thailand, like Bangkok, by using six methods: research literature, personal experience, field study, media, symposium, and interviews. Data collection was carried out from December 1996 through April 2022. Interviews were conducted with performing arts professionals, scholars and Thai & foreign audiences. The data was evaluated via a hexagonal analysis model developed specifically for this project. This research advances the main research proposition: Provision of a model of the creative process for reinterpreting dance as part of heritage interpretation for the 21st century and how to use dance as part of arts reinterpretation to keep Thai arts alive in urbanized areas. This research found the model of using original text and mural painting sources, together with blending of techniques derived from different cultures to help emphasize the magical, facilitated the use of different elements which make the performance more spectacular, with costumes adapted, while maintaining a flavor of the traditional aesthetic, and allowed the dancers complete freedom of movement.

**Keywords:** *Reinterpreting Performing Arts, 21st century, Narai Avatara Performance, Dance-Drama, Thailand*

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## Introduction

The development of dance forms in Thailand has been further described by Mattani Moj dara Rutnin: “The Ayutthaya kings and members of the royal family of the later period from the eighteenth century on contributed significantly to the development and refinement of khon and lakhon, which became models for Thonburi and Ratanakosin drama and theatre” (Mattani Moj dara Rutnin 1996:46) In large cities around the world traditional art forms are under threat. Bangkok, Thailand, is an obvious example of this. It is a country where foreign tourists delight in the unique artistic and cultural heritage, but where many of its traditional art forms are actually in danger of dying out from urbanized areas. The situation is perhaps most alarming in the case of Thai live performing arts. At the same time, those closest to these traditional art forms recognize the great value they continue to hold. This raises the question of how to conserve a vibrant performing arts scene which itself is a means of heritage interpretation and conservation

The dance-drama *Narai Avatara* was originally staged at Chiang Mai’s Kad Theatre on the 8th and 9th November, 1996. After making its debut in Chiang Mai, six year later, *Narai Avatara* was staged again for urbanized audiences in Bangkok at the Thailand Cultural Centre, with a new all-male mainly professional cast and live narration, chorus and traditional music. The dance-drama *Narai Avatara* is an example of a work which sought to breathe new life into the live performing arts scene in Thailand. Enacting episodes from the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana* and the main source for traditional Thai performing arts, the work was firmly rooted in the Thai tradition. However, *Narai Avatara* was not a Thai dance production, but an innovative contemporary dance theatre production with international appeal. Nevertheless, while it embraced modern movement and diverse international influences, its foundation in original, authentic source materials ensured that the production was very much a means of Thai heritage interpretation and conservation, actively seeking to raise awareness of the richness of the Thai arts, literary and performing arts traditions and affirm living Thai heritage.

This production has been the topic of a dissertation-length piece of research on ‘Reinterpreting performing arts for the 21st century in reference to the *Narai Avatara* performance.’ Here, some of the key findings of this research are presented. In particular, this article highlights findings which may be of interest for those concerned with the development and/or the staging of arts heritage interpretation in urbanized areas around the world.

Sadly, in modern-day Thailand, traditional art, traditional performing arts and early urban theatre entertainment in general are largely perceived as being old-fashioned, irrelevant and of little interest. It would not be an overstatement to say that traditional arts as national heritages are at risk of dying out. This situation has been exacerbated by the way traditional performing arts have often been presented or interpreted. All too often, productions which have been staged have adapted traditional forms merely by making a brief examination of traditional dance steps and then crudely ‘updating’ them. This type of adaptation invariably lacks authenticity and represents a limited, superficial approach to reinterpretation, one which often results in a finished commercial product of limited aesthetic value and which does little to communicate a positive heritage interpretation

message. Moreover, when considered more thoroughly, this type of work seems to have little in common with the tradition it is trying to duplicate.

In order to keep an 'old' form alive, it is important not just to make a quick survey of its outer form, but to remember its essential nature. In the case of Thai dance, any rigorous consideration of the tradition soon shows it to be a tradition that is actually based on interpretation. Regarding interpretation as it relates to heritage, Alpin has pointed out that: "Entertainment can certainly capture the visitor's interest and set the scene for information acquisition" (Alpin 2002:42). For Pisit Charoenwongsa, "Interpretation is a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world and their role within it" (Pisit Charoenwongsa, 2001). Siriporn Nanta provides us with an interesting definition of what heritage actually means: "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations" (Siriporn Nanta, ed. 2000:6). "The idea of the national heritage can encompass notions of landscape and, indeed, notions of race" (Schama and Wright quoted in Meethan, 200:99) "By labelling an object, building or site as part of the heritage, it is elevated above the mundane into a symbol of a nation, or people" (Meethan, 2001:99) Heritage is increasingly being drawn into a globalized tourism industry. "Like culture in its broader anthropological meaning, heritage is intimately linked to identity (personal, communal and national) and to core value systems; hence commodification of heritage as tourist 'product' is inevitably fraught with tensions" (Trotter, 2001:141) Hall and McArthur note, that performing arts interpretation represents an especially useful and versatile artistic tool, "Theatrical performance is one of the most creative and artistic forms of learning." (Hall & McArthur, 1998:178)

It is quite realistic then to acknowledge that Thai dance, even though it is quite distinct, is the result of a fusion of influences and their adaptation to local styles. This view, that the origins of Thai performing arts can certainly be traced back to foreign ideals, was firmly supported by leading 20th century Thai arts scholar H. H. Prince Dhaninivat Kromamin Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn:

"Thai dance in the past had contemporary processes of changing and adapting, H. H. Prince Dhaninivat Kromamin Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn remarked," dramatics in our country were doubtless inspired by foreign ideals such as the Indian, the Indonesian and the Cambodian. With the lapse of centuries we have evolved our own ideals till they seem far apart from the original sources of inspiration." (Dhaninivat Kromamin Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn, H. H. Prince quoted in Dhanit Yupho, 1963: Back cover)

These comments also remind us how Thai dance, throughout its history, has remained an art form characterized by a high degree of adaptability and a willingness to use and take advantage of 'contemporary processes.' The dance forms did not develop in isolation but were and are part of a broader artistic tradition. For example, Khon (Thai masked dance-drama) developed from puppet theatre forms, and most importantly, it developed from the Ramakien. Khon, which has been

recognized by Jukka Miettinen as “one of the most spectacular forms of South-East Asian dance-drama. It can involve over a hundred actors, a large pipad orchestra, narrators, singers, and a chorus” (Miettinen, 1992:55) Examination of Thai traditional mural paintings and texts of the Ramakien suggest how the various forms interpreting the Indian epic influenced each other, but all had the Ramayana, or at least the Ramakien, as their true source.

In keeping with this tradition, the creation of *Narai Avatara* looked beyond previous performing arts enactments of the Ramakien to their source, taking the text as its inspiration and starting-point. Because it did this, *Narai Avatara* is a reinterpretation which represents a genuine continuation of the tradition of enacting the Ramakien in dance theatre form. Having gone to the source, the performance was then developed as an authentic interpretation of the chosen episodes from the Ramakien. In this way, rather than relying on traditional dance steps to guide the creative vision, by going back further, all aspects of the performance were linked to the original Thai heritage that inspired the traditional dance in the first place. This foundation in the original source text was doubly effective in that it served as a clear artistic frame for the production, a frame which assured authenticity but which allowed for a dynamic and appealing production.

In addition to the text, the guiding artistic frame was also influenced by traditional representations of the Ramakien in visual art. As dance is at once a narrative and a visual form, it was quite fitting that the performance drew on narrative and visual traditional representations as guides for its composition. In keeping with the performance’s heritage interpretation aims, these traditional representations came from the heart of the Thai arts and literary traditions. The extant Rama I version of the text was chosen as the narration to accompany the performance and this provided a startpoint for the choreography. This version was chosen not just because it is the most celebrated Thai version of the epic, but because it is the oldest ‘complete’ Thai version available and because this version has provided the foundation for classical Thai dance interpretations of episodes from the epic throughout the Rattanakosin period. Perhaps just as celebrated are the traditional Thai mural paintings depicting the Ramayana which can be seen in the galleries at The Royal Palace or Wat Phra Keaw in Bangkok. This foundation in authentic source images and representations then provided a clear basis for the composition from which the aesthetic vision could take shape.

This authentic artistic frame then had the effect of assuring that the whole performance was imbued with authenticity. *Narai Avatara* can be regarded as an active visual and musical interpretation of Thai arts and literary heritage as represented by the traditional mural paintings and Rama I’s poetry lyrics. These influences subtly infuse and underscore all aspects of the performance’s aesthetic: in movement, music, sound, costume and scenery. This ensures that the performance exudes a traditional flavour ‘from the inside’ throughout, even when the outer form draws on other traditions. The influence of traditional heritage is thus internalized and expressed in aesthetic forms which run much deeper than explicit visual or verbal references.

This authenticity from inside out highlights the tremendous value of a clear artistic frame. For one thing, the underlying influence of the original Rama I lyrics and the traditional paintings assures real unity in the performance, helping the various elements in the composition work together and strengthening the independent effects of the various visual and auditory elements as they communicate harmoniously to the audience. *Narai Avatara* draws on many dance and artistic traditions. Of course, this offers many rich possibilities, but also some dangers. Unconsidered juxtaposition of different styles could lead to an ineffective mish-mash. However, the clear artistic frame and guiding concept make it easier to maintain unity and coherence in the production and for audience members to engage with the multiple layers of meaning in the performance.

The underlying aesthetic cohesion in the performance also facilitates the use of different elements which make the performance more spectacular. This makes it easier for the performance to appeal to different niche audiences while never coming away from the aim of working as a means of heritage interpretation and conservation which can keep the Thai dance tradition alive and vibrant in the 21st century. Furthermore, as the performance communicates to the audience on so many different levels, it encourages much greater audience engagement with the performance: something very important when conservation and interpretation are among a performance's goals. In addition, a clear artistic frame provides a solid, identifiable base upon which it is easier to harness the effects of sudden blending of techniques derived from different cultures. The effects of such blending can then be used to help emphasize the magical, otherworldly atmosphere which is so central to the enactment of mythical episodes like those portrayed in *Narai Avatara*, without confusing the audience.

Another benefit of the authentic artistic frame is the way it can help advance heritage interpretation and conservation objectives. In *Narai Avatara*, a good illustration of this would be the costumes. For instance, the bare-chested muscular demon figures, including Nontuk with his green body paint, are a very clear evocation of the representations of these figures in traditional mural paintings. The closeness of the costume to the traditional painted image helps recall, at least in the minds of audience members who have seen such images, the original mural paintings, reminding them of the wider influence and presence of the Ramakien in Thai culture. Such costume also serves as a good practical example of 'source authenticity.' The bare-chested demons are inspired not by the way demons have been represented in previous dance interpretations, but by the source these dance interpretations came from.

Consideration of the costumes also shows how working with the heritage source or roots together with creativity and integrity can often be highly practical, particularly in terms of marrying the aims of heritage conservation and contemporary appeal. For a performance with heritage aims, some might think that everything in a performance should be subordinate to the preservation of outer traditional forms. However, such an approach can be limiting and so be counter-productive in terms of appealing to a wider audience. As has been mentioned, the *Narai*

Avatara costumes, for example, were rooted in the tradition, not of Thai masked dance costumes, but of their source, the Thai mural paintings of the Ramakien. So at once, the costumes were innovative, breaking away from the traditional forms associated with Thai masked dance, but still referencing the source. Sathaporn Sonthong, expert in Thai dance, formerly the Head of Thai Dance Division, Music and Drama Division, Fine Art Department, commented on the show.

Narai Avatara: The story was full of beautiful dance styles, new costumes and head-dress design and the characteristic of mixing Thai art, dazzling stage design as it is in the story, music and other equipment used in the performance (Sathaporn Sonthong, Interview, 2017).

Crucially, this helps advance the performance aims in a number of ways. First of all, on a practical level, the lighter, and often bare-chested costumes allowed the dancers complete freedom of movement, which made the movement much more powerful as a communicative tool (as the dancers' movements were not inhibited by thick garments they were able to move freely and dramatically around the stage). Secondly, while moving away from the thick, heavy and somewhat constrictive costumes of Thai dance-drama, but still referencing elements of this style, the costume helped convey a significant point about the Thai aesthetic tradition: that it does not need to be fixed in order to remain. In other words, if costume, or for that matter, any other aspect of performing arts composition is adapted while maintaining a flavour of the traditional aesthetic, it can bring new life to that aesthetic. Finally, in 'breaking away' from the constraints of conservative style, the costumes also have an immediate impact on the audience. Bare-chested and body-painted dancers are not usually seen in Thai dance-drama. However, while such costumes may seem at first glance to smack of a foreign influence, they also evoke traditional mural paintings. In this way, audiences are encouraged to consider the 'Thai dance tradition' in a broader context. For Thai dance aficionados this might mean looking at the familiar form from a new, different perspective. For those who may have a less than favorable impression of the genre it can change their point of view, encouraging them to re-approach Thai arts and culture without prejudice.

So here we have seen how a bold approach to working with traditional forms can be very rewarding. However, in some ways, aspects of traditional form are highly useful as they are and can be exploited to help keep the performance clear. In Narai Avatara, such an example was the use of split levels of stage. To illustrate, Phra Isuan's (Shiva's) ring of fire appeared at the highest level of the stage, indicating his superior status to all below. Such use of hierarchical stage space and positioning is very much in keeping with the conventions of Thai performance, but it still works very well to communicate to the audience and so was maintained.

Of course, in some instances, the source itself can provide a strong communicative device. A good example in Narai Avatara would be the use of the representation of Phra Isuan (Shiva) in his form as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance of the Creation and Dissolution of the Universe. The incorporation of this iconic Shiva image

serves at once to evoke the rich Indian tradition, while at the same time appealing and communicating clearly to the audience. However, as it does this in a wholly authentic way, through the use of a traditional Indian heritage image, it also draws the audience's attention to the roots of the Ramakien and associated arts heritage.

These examples illustrate another key factor when working with traditional forms: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it!" Hierarchical positioning is an example of a feature of a traditional performance which works very well to communicate meaning to the audience. As such, there is no need to change it. Another example of this was the maintenance of the traditional maebot dance steps, the Thai dance which is made up of the steps and postures which form the basis for all traditional Thai dance movements in Act One Scene Five. In this scene, the demon Nontuk, mimicking Nang Narai, makes a fatal gesture, pointing his diamond finger at his own thigh, and so causing his own downfall. During this episode, the text mentions some of the specific steps he takes. Clearly then, if the dance is to remain authentic it should include these steps; and this was the case in *Narai Avatara*. Nevertheless, for *Narai Avatara*, these steps were speeded up. This was done to allow the movement to be more evocative of the idea contained in the text, that Nang Narai is beguiling and hypnotizing Nontuk. Here then, in order to stay as authentic as possible to the source text, the traditional dance form, while preserved, was accelerated in order to make it communicate more effectively with the audience. This example illustrates another important point. When reinterpreting for a 21st century audience, the creator needs to consider the sensibilities of that audience. Arguably, for a modern-day audience conditioned by the non-stop visual changes of advertising and contemporary television, the traditional speed maebot might be too slow for them to follow, but performed more quickly, it is much easier for them to follow and assimilate the idea of Nontuk being tricked and bewildered. So while performances should stay authentic, they should also be comprehensible and appealing.

Similarly, just as traditional elements need to be managed with discernment, the same goes for more innovative elements. Here, it is also important to underline that while movement from ballet and other foreign forms were included in the *Narai Avatara* choreography, they were included when they contributed something to the scene. When foreign forms are incorporated well, in a way which works to make the overall communication clearer, this has a number of effects. Firstly, by involving different forms, the performance can appeal to fans of them all, helping ensure the desired wider appeal. In addition, as different characters dance in quite different styles and different scenes draw on completely different dance or music styles, the contrasts and distinctions necessary for a clear development of the narrative can be communicated very clearly. Contrasting styles also work to convey the sense of magic, malevolence or splendor associated with characters like Nang Narai, (Vishnu in the guise of a beautiful woman) Kakanasoon (a supernatural demon bird) or Phra Isuan (Lord Shiva) respectively. Another benefit is the way this juxtaposition of styles keeps the performance lively and the audience alert, more

engaged and so better able to follow the action. Finally, by incorporating elements from different styles, disciplines and traditions, the performance can help audiences become aware of things they have in common. For example, while ballet and Asian dance have obvious differences, audience members may realize that they both use movement to develop narratives and convey emotions. At a more global level, this type of open, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary approach can then encourage audiences to recognize how different art forms are just different ways of expressing or developing similar ideas.

As it does this, it further underlines the point that while Thai art and culture is distinct, it has never existed in isolation but has stayed distinct while drawing on many other traditions. This raises another important point. Specifically it reminds audiences that foreign influences are not necessarily a threat to Thai culture or art, but can, and actually have, enriched it. Suwannee Chalanukhro, National Artist of Performing Art: Thai dance – Lakorn Ram of the year 1990 commented on the show:

I was so excited to see Western style performing art mixed with Thai dance. I was glad to see the 'fit' of dance steps, costumes, light and sound, and other special effects which beautifully encouraged each other (Suwannee Chalanukhro, Interview, 2004).

Clearly then, working with foreign influences actually continues the Thai tradition and can actually be productive in relation to the aims of preserving Thai heritage.

Furthermore, it should perhaps be further underlined that while it may appear ironic, working with all the influences which influence contemporary Thai arts – traditional and modern, indigenous and foreign - but using them to reinterpret the source of 'traditional' forms, can bring about a much more authentic product than would be possible by merely attempting to duplicate old dance routines. The need to go back to the source of the 'old', traditional forms and ensure they stay authentic creations and not mere duplications, is surely a key factor for the long term success or failure of reinterpreted performing arts as a means of heritage conservation.

This type of approach allows for the development of a spectacular and engaging performance, like *Narai Avatara*, which is much better able to leave a deep and lasting impression on a wide urbanized audience, and so have the effect of sacralizing its original text and mural painting sources than a performance which might stay truer to a traditional 'form' but which is regarded as 'boring' or 'sleep-inducing' by the audience and only appeals to a small niche anyway. Surely, it is productions which are 'authentically appealing' or which manage to combine authentic heritage and contemporary appeal, which are best placed to prove that a traditional genre like Thai dance is part of a living tradition with plenty of life left in it.





Figure 1. Act Two Scene One: Divinities go to see Phra Isuan at Mt Meru. This was originally staged at Chiang Mai's Kad Theatre on the 8th and 9th November, 1996.



Figure 2. Act One Scene 6: In 2002 Bangkok production, the collapse of Nontuk as Vishnu's trap is sprung. He falls to the floor after pointing at his own foot and badly injuring himself.



Figure 3. Act Two Scene 3: In 2002 Bangkok production, hearing the music, Phra Narai on the naga wakes up with astonishment after seeing a big group of the divinities.



Figure 4. Act Three Scene 2: In 2002 Bangkok production, Kakanasoon in the Ika form destroys the pavilion and steals half a lump of nectar.

## Conclusion

The production of Narai Avatara sought to show how traditional art, the idealization of an early urban theatre entertainment, is anything but irrelevant, highlighting its value and showing how it can still be exciting and interesting among urbanized audiences. By using traditional art as its foundation, but by adding many different elements to the production, Narai Avatara aimed to alert audiences to the ongoing relevance of traditional forms and their continuing allure. In doing so, the hope was to sacralize traditional art, making audiences in a wide urban area realize that the Thai artistic heritage is something to be treasured and be proud of, and something which is still full of life. It is hoped that this work will be of use to others who wish to pursue similar aims.

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