

The Asian Conference on Arts & Culture

*What Allows Cultures to Survive? –
The Performing Arts Responding
to Urban Crises
Bangkok August 2012*

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This is a report from the Asian Conference on Arts and Culture, August 8 – 9, 2012, held at Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok, Thailand.

Ten years ago on October 12, 2002 a bomb exploded in the tourist town of Kuta, Bali, killing 202 people and injuring 240 more. The war on terror that had starting with the heinous attack on the World Trade Center in New York was all of a sudden brought to Indonesian soil. How did the people of Bali respond and what lessons can be learned for crisis preparedness education in Asian cities generally? These questions, posed at the opening of the conference on arts and cultures at the Bangkok campus of Srinakharinwirot University by the keynote speaker Professor Leon Rubin and setting an important agenda for the whole conference, could be summed up in the most burning cultural question of our times: What allows cultures to survive?

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And how did Bali survive? Professor Rubin, distinguished arts educationist and theatre director on the global stage, drawing from years of experience with Asian theatre, referred to the intimate connection of crises response to the worldview of Balinese society. In fact all arts on the island, he said, are connected to the aim of restoring balance. The forces of good and evil will always be among us. Evil can only be encountered by increasing the works of good.

And here the artist community leads out in the response. Professor Rubin referred to Picasso responding almost immediately to the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish civil war through painting his now famous work.

The performing arts community of Bali did not respond by pleading for revenge, that would only engender more evil. Instead, Bali as the last vestige of Hindu culture, was seen honoring the principle of nonviolence through the restorative purification ceremonies held all over the island in the wake of the tragedy. Pointing to the religious roots of theater that existed in ancient Greece and continued on into the European middle ages with their mystery plays that fulfilled comparable ritual functions, professor Rubin pleaded for a return to these spiritual roots, with Asia leading the way in restoring the transforming and humanizing power of the arts.

And so an accent had been set and a perspective drawn up, encouraging a fruitful debate on the variety of issues presented in the individual presentations. The glory and power of Asian arts as a medium of integration was further explored by the eminent Professor Emeritus Surapone Virulart pointing to the spiritual and thematic interconnectedness of Asian art, and offering an optimistic outlook for the promotion of Asian cultural continuity in the coming ASEAN union.

Associate Professor Suchityra Chongstitvatana, Director of the Institute of Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University followed suit through her touching presentation "Love Story in modern Thai globalized culture," Professor Karen Coats of Illinois State University, USA, engagingly exploring childrens' culture "The arts of the cradle, the cradle of the arts" and last but not least Professor Anissa Fung, founder and project leader of the Visual Arts and Community Development Research Project at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Department of Creative Arts, presenting her "Reflection on Chinese Ritual Culture: Art for the Mirror World."