

Lakhon Rong Lek -- Little Theatres

Vilas Wong-ngam

A few years ago, I heard that a 30-seat theatre opened on the rooftop of a townhouse near Wireless Road, here in Bangkok. "Well," I said to myself, "that fad will never last."

But I was wrong. There are now several other of these little theatres around Bangkok, including Moradokmai, 8X8, Makhampom studio, Crescent Moon, Naked Mask -- and the latest one, Democracy Studio. Each month, these little theatres bring together performers and audiences in small spaces where they experiment with freedom in various quarters of Bangkok -- from the northern Saphankwai to the eastern Sukhumvit-Soi Thonglor and in the business center at Rama 4 Road, across from Lumpinee Park, and even on Phayathai Road, nearby Siam Square.

It's too bad that not many people have heard about these little performances spaces of Bangkok. If they knew about them, they would know that they are a vital part of the small theatre community in this city -- mostly urban theatre practitioners and their friends -- but also part of Thailand's experiments with freedom.

Today, I would like to act as your matchmaker, and introduce you to these little theatres, and change your view of theatre life here in Bangkok.

Local urban theatre artists started these little theatres. They walked hard roads to sponsor their work. Many have been working in theatre for decades. No rich investor or government agency helps them out. They were

founded and funded by artists, and are operate on one basic principle. They would like to show their responsibility to Thai society -- but helping it become a bit more free.

How do they do this?

These little theatres open up new spaces for new experiments in freedom. By working together with others, performers and audiences work together to help create a small moment of equality in Thai society.

I would first like to call these little theatres "theatre spaces of freedom" to stress the sites where we can work out open exchanges and interactions between performers and audiences. These theatre spaces of freedom, or in Thai "Ronglakorn hang israphap" names the heart of these little theatres.

In many ways, these little theatres are at odds with Thailand. This country follows constitutional monarchy and aspires to a democratic government. But people tend to stick to norms, follow rules, and listen to leaders. Are we Thais not free, then?

In these little theatres we dare to experiment with unexpected things, to think differently, and to work out new possibilities for being together. In these small free spaces -- no more than 80 square metres -- we work to encourage free thoughts and free expression for performers and audiences alike. We make a bit of freedom in these spaces. We want to share this freedom more with Thailand, to help it become a bit more free.

Why are they little? Why are there only 30 seats?

The spaces of these theatres are limited number in both their size and scope in part because we are poor and flexible. Yet this stresses their basic equality -- if you book early, you can be in the front seat. There is no 'reserved seat' for the latecomers who do not know the time and respect others.

The small 30 seat number also forces the price of the tickets to keep a single price for all, so all have an equal chance to watch the performance up close. It ensures that money does not shape what happens in these little theatres. If you arrive first, you can sit where you please -- it's all first come, first served,

Another very important thing concerns one's rights in these little theatres. If you do not like the performance--if you feel uneasy with it or if it is too much for you or if it reaches into your saved space--you can complain or walk out and people will understand.

In creating freedom, both performers and audiences are bold.

These little theatres are also open for talking and discussions before and during and after the performances. People like and expect an exchange of thoughts and opinions. If you walked out, you can surely say why.

These little theatres are theatres of the moment. They perform in the here and now -- they are focused on what is happening now, on interacting with contemporary society. The spaces and what happens in them focus on whatever is in the larger world and its concerns, and combine it into a performance -- whether formal or not as an art form of dance, music, theatre. They reflect what is going outside these little

spaces of freedom and experiment with new ways of being together with others, on a very small scale.

These little theatre spaces are vital, flowing, and dynamic parts of the great urban flow of this highly urbanized and huge cosmopolitan city of Bangkok. They are alive and moving with artists and audiences, helping to make Bangkok a bit more lively and a bit more free.

Now fewer than 10 of these little theatres benefit Thai urban society as follows:

1. They focus and are responsive to the people and the urban community.
2. They present our stories--of you and me and every little one in teh big city.
3. They want you to interact, keep active, and remain responsive to how you share and exchange and show your thoughts -- whether for or against.
4. They are free spaces--free from the power of governmental hierarchy and burueacracy, free from the power of money and commercialism, and free from the silent power of conformity.

These little theatres are still very much alive and still very free. They are live -- in the moment -- every Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday -- in the little corners of Bangkok's urban flow. Please join them ?- buy the tickets to their productions ?- not only to support their work, but also to encourage yourself and to strengthen you mind as you help freedom to grow a bit more.

There's no need for high goals or great expectations.

Open yourself to joining in these experiments in freedom.

Search with them and find out for your ownself about the theatres of freedom in Bangkok.

Who knows? You might realize something that you have never thought about before ?- something in yourself that you almost forget -- something open and something free.