

Dancing between the Old and New Worlds



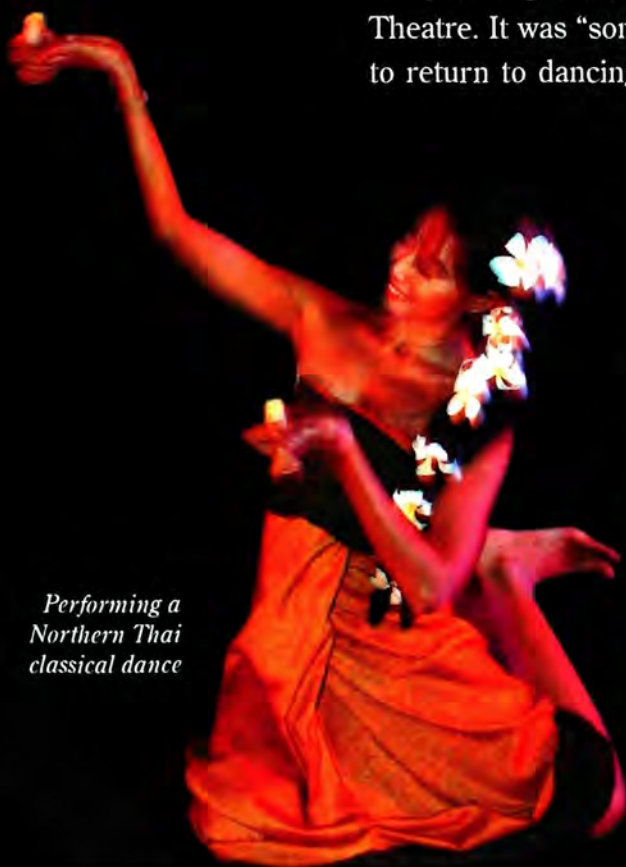
Juthamard "Som" Sucharitchun was brought up dancing classical Thai dance. Today, she is finding her feet in modern choreography, switching over – professionally – to the world of contemporary dance. Having already performed in a number of modern dance shows, she is looking forward to more projects in a promising career that seems about to take off dramatically.

Som, a native of Bangkok, is currently rehearsing a new repertoire and will perform in dance concerts at the new Ratchada Theatre in Bangkok's latest entertainment scene. She studied classical Thai dance for six years at Weetialai Nathasit (College of Dramatic Arts), then pursued dancing further at Chulalongkorn University, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Fine and Applied Arts. Upon graduation, she worked for three years in the costume department at GMM Grammy, an entertainment company, and didn't dance during this period. Her first encounter with contemporary dance form happened a few years ago, watching a performance at the National Theatre. It was "something strange and new" for her. She felt the urge to return to dancing, and at about the same time was introduced to 'Boy' (Tongchai Hannarong of Komonlagoon Dance Company), who became her teacher for modern dance.



*Som at
6 years old*

The petite and attractive 28-year-old has performed in "Tas" (Slaves) and "Karma" at the 2003 Bangkok Theatre Festival, Thai traditional dance at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and contemporary dance "Jodmai Jak See Da II" (Letters from Sita II) at the National Theatre, Bangkok. Beyond acquiring the art of Thai traditional dance, "Khon", and in dramatic arts, Som also performs Indonesian and Indian dance. She enjoys volleyball, badminton, movies, reading and book-collecting.



*Performing a
Northern Thai
classical dance*

What did you hope to be when you were a child?

A veterinarian. I love animals, especially dogs. When I was young, my dog died, and I wondered why the doctor couldn't save its life. I vowed to become an animal doctor so that my pets would not die.



◀ Som (middle) representing her school in a travelling dance performance of Northern Thai dance

What career would you have if you could change?

I would like to run a small comics rental shop. I am very fond of comics myself. Also, work with UNICEF because I like to help children. I've been dancing professionally for the past two years, and I feel excellent. If I did not dance for a day, I feel uneasy.

What are the best aspects of being a dancer?

That the audience appreciates dance. It is an immense inspiration that what I do affects the people watching me. Also if I'm performing classical dance, I feel privileged to represent and promote the tradition and cultural heritage of my country. It comforts me that I may contribute toward the preservation of my culture and arts.

Is there anything you don't like about being a dancer?

The fact that there are criticism and opposition to other forms and genres that do not conform to what purists perceive as tradition. For example, when we mix modern movements with classical dance, the traditionalist will cry foul of the pollution of the national culture. I feel that innovation cannot be equated with destruction of one's traditions. Classical dance, for me, is one aspect of performing arts.

I didn't enjoy dancing when I was young and being taught how to dance. It seemed to be a physical suffering. I preferred to play with other children, and didn't understand why my mother kept taking me to dance class. As I grew up, and when the school selected me to perform on stage, I began to appreciate it. On my first stage appearance, I stood on the stage, stunned by the occasion and was unable to move until my mother in the audience, shouted for me to "Lum pai, lum pai!!" (dance, child, dance)



Performing a contemporary rendition of a Thai traditional dance (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

away!!). I started dancing, and since then, have not looked back with any regret, and in fact have felt much pride in having the ability to dance.

Were you criticized?

Sometimes. The critics are mostly dancers and teachers who are protective of our heritage.

They watch contemporary dance, and ask "What is that? I don't understand." I understand their feelings as they are also concerned with the negative impact on our culture, and that we should ensure our traditions are not overwhelmed by other influences.

In Phuket, 2002



So how do you respond to those who criticize you?

I would say to them: "Acharn (teacher), I will not forget or abandon what I have learned - I still cherish the tradition of classical dance even though I am now performing modern works. Contemporary dance is, for me, something new to add to my experience of life and dance; there is no conflict between the modern and traditional dance - they are two different skills, and they go together, in my view, if dance is to be appreciated as an expression of our thoughts and feelings and experience of being alive. It is not a question of disrespecting one or the other, merely new experiences to have in our life." I appreciate and love both traditional and contemporary dance. One provides the basics for me, and the other offers opportunities for freedom and innovation. I do not choose; I feel free and open to accept and absorb new influences and experiences, without forgetting where I came from. I feel privileged to have learnt dance on the foundation of the classical Thai dance, because I am Thai, and I can feel the dance tradition in me. Ballet, for instance, may be accessible to everyone, but Thai classical dance is more demanding in terms of the characteristics and cultural make-up of the practitioner. I think that classical Thai dance is more difficult to learn. It is easier for a dancer with the background of Thai classical dance to learn ballet than for a ballet dancer to learn Thai, I think.

Asian dancers, teachers and choreographers seem to assume that contemporary dance invariably means dance rooted in the western traditions of ballet, jazz, etc... but each country and culture has or can create its own contemporary dance, as contemporary refers to current styles, ways, means, techniques, forms of movements and choreography, evolved from the local traditions. But in the schools, universities and educational institutions, contemporary is mentally framed in the Western traditions. What difficulties did you encounter in adapting to modern dance forms?

We should analyze this restricted/limited idea we have of contemporary/modern dance. Ballet, for example, is not a

prerequisite for contemporary dance. As for adopting it, I met problems in every area. In contemporary dance, ballet is often a part of it, but I do not have a grounding in ballet. For example, the pointed feet technique is in contrast to the flat feet position widely applied in Thai dance. My body felt rigid, and movements became awkward. There are a great many contrasting techniques between ballet and classical Thai. Due to my lack of the basics, I still have much to learn in contemporary dance ... ballet postures, to start with. Timing and rhythm are also areas in contemporary dance to which I needed to adapt. In Thai classical dance, we move in rhythm to the sounds of the drums and cymbals. Percussion guides our timing.

Solo performance of the classical 'Chui Chai Phram' at the main auditorium of the Chulalongkorn University

But modern dance demands more control in the use of breathing, the psyche, thoughts and emotions in the process. We are compelled to analyze and apply our imagination, and engage in role-playing on an independent basis. There is a sense of individual freedom; a liberation from the need to depend on the harmony among dancers, musical accompaniment and cues as is necessary in Thai dance.

At the beginning, it was difficult trying to appreciate contemporary dance. It came to a point after four months when I felt I wanted to discontinue the training. "It's not me; Thai classical dance is my forte," I kept thinking. I was at times in tears, and close to giving up on modern dance, as I felt that I lacked the fundamental knowledge for it. 'Boy', my coach, supported and persuaded me to persevere. Gradually, I began to enjoy it. My good friend, Pum, was with me all this time and encouraged me when I was demoralized about having no basics in an art form which, I observed, many practitioners were very good at.

If someone were to come up to you and ask you what you do and the concepts behind your performance, what would you say?

Usually, the performing group would gather to discuss ideas for the performance. For example, we raise questions such as: "when you hear the drums, what comes into your mind?" Some think of a fire, others a prayer. These discussions develop the meanings and concepts for the show. We may not explain individual movements but there are sections and parts of a performance which emerged from thought-out concepts, and are therefore explicable. In Thai classical dance, movements are full of significance. For example, a woman hurt by an affair would signify her feelings by a subtle difference in her movements, representing either bearing a grudge or deep suffering. In contemporary dance, there is less rigid interpretation of movements and their significance.

We are given the chance to innovate and express from a personal preference. However, I still ask a lot of questions about the meanings of gestures and movements.

What other talents do you most desire to have?

I would like to be able to design clothes and make dresses

What are your memories of your childhood?

My father, who is a driver for a corporate expatriate, was a very strict person; he wanted me to study well and become a doctor, teacher, or government official. He didn't want me to take up dancing. I was not permitted to watch movies or go out



Performing, in 'Letter From Sita 2', National Theatre, 2004

to play, having to be home studying. It was my mother who took me to dance schools against my father's wishes.

When I was young, my parents argued and fought. Their fighting drove me out of the house to the nearby park, which was just across the bridge from my house. I felt calm and relieved from distress while I was there, alone. I watched the birds, sky, read in my regular spot, and took naps. I would go home feeling better. On weekends, I would spend time there too. The pollution in Bangkok could be suffocating, but in the park it would be fine; I could relax there for the entire day. I spent a lot of time on my own, at the park, when I was a child.

When I was twelve, I fell off a boat with my school bag! I was sitting in the back of the boat talking with my school mate when I fell into the water. The boat sped off for some distance before coming back to rescue me. I remember clearly that when I was back on the boat, the passengers reprimanded me for my carelessness. "Do you realise what happened was very dangerous? Why were you so negligent? You must take care of yourself!" I felt that I had done something wrong. The experience taught me to be more concerned about my personal safety because to neglect it could adversely affect others around me. Soon, the school came to know of the incident, and so did my mother. She slapped me for the first time in my life, and expressed her disappointment that I



*Studying at the College of
Dramatic Arts*

had kept it a secret not informing her about what had happened to me. I cried, not understanding what I'd done wrong to deserve this treatment. Mother was upset, saying. "Do you know how much I love you and worry about you that my heart would break if anything happened to you?"

My mother is the most influential person in my life. She is my role model woman; an epitome of perseverance. She had seen me through dance school, and has encouraged me all the way. My father is supportive now, and appreciates what I do in the world of dance. He used to be authoritarian, punishing the children by



*Practising for performance in
'Letter From Sita 2'*

beating them, and I didn't appreciate him; but I have grown up, and understand his disciplinarian ways. Now, he's a constant follower of my performances, commenting on how I can improve, and expressing his opinions.

Is there a dancer you admire very much?

I admire 'Boy' (of Komonlagoon Dance Company). He introduced me to contemporary dance, and showed me the ropes, inspiring me to be a better dancer. My perception of him is that he possesses a talent that has taken him far afield in the local milieu of dance, and I feel that I have so much to learn from him.

What do you do with your spare time?

I hardly have that much spare time to do anything else but dance. Each day except Sunday, between 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., I train with a dance company; and between 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., I dance as part of a stage performance in a pub – part-time job for extra income. Whatever time

I manage to free myself of dancing, I go swimming. Dancing is an extremely physical preoccupation; I feel that I exercise a lot, everyday. Often, for the few hours before 10 p.m., I have to practise for other freelance performances. It's tiring, but I feel energetic in such a routine. Sunday is the only full day of rest when I will sleep to compensate for the limited hours of sleep I get each week, and also to spend time with my pet dogs. I feel young, and aware that I'm capable of achieving much; so I'm doing as much as I can to take advantage of the opportunities that come my way at the moment.



*Som at 20 years of
age, in her 2nd year at
university*

What do you love/hate about Bangkok?

I like Bangkok for its variety, and the diverse experiences it offers. Physically, You can find temples, schools, shopping malls, etc... in close vicinity, and such confusion that I've come to appreciate as unstructured creativity. I recall that on my return from a visit to Germany, I felt for the first time, distinctly, that Bangkok was my

home, a place where I was born and a part of. In contrast to the orderliness of Europe, I love untidy Bangkok even more so, because of its spontaneous appearance ... the juxtaposition of institutions, businesses and interests. What I dislike about Bangkok is when the floods disrupt our lives, going to places nrvp,rd a major task, the traffic jams can be unbearable, and in my home we have to move things to the upper floor.

What are your fears?

Ghosts! [laughing]. Loss of confidence, especially during a new learning experience such as doing modern dance. When I began to have doubts about my ability to excel in this area, and saw that other dancers perform so much better than I could, my resolve was significantly weakened. This is something that I fear, as a dancer. I broke my toe once, but compared to the fear of loss in confidence, a physical disability is not equal to a psychological problem of inferiority or lack of confidence.

What's your favorite possession?

My dog. I've always had a pet dog since I was eight years old. I feel that I can't live without pet dogs; I'm used to having one or two all my life. Presently, I'm taking care of an English cockerel and a poodle.

Are you lucky?

I feel lucky, because there are many things that I wanted or wished for and I have them already. For example, my academic achievements; obtaining employment; joining the performing troupe of my desire and dancing professionally as I wished to. Alright, I couldn't be a veterinarian, that's okay ... I love what I'm doing now. My father sent me for Thai-boxing training when I was a young girl, but my mother was not in favour of the possibility that I might be turned into a professional boxer. So she clandestinely accompanied me to dance school, and pressed me into the dance world. She enrolled me into dancing school, to learn Thai classical dance, 'Ram Thai', and has been encouraging me throughout my life. I feel lucky for that.



Outdoor practice in the park

If you had a choice, would you prefer to be a woman or a man?

I prefer to be a woman. Some women wish to be men, and men women, but I'm very satisfied being a woman, a woman with the opportunity and ability to dance, express beauty, and inspire awe, admiration and respect. Women in Thai society have numerous restrictions but if we compromise a little, we get by pretty comfortably.

Do you have an exercise regiment to keep you fit for the dancing you do?

I don't have much time for disciplined exercises, but during dance training, we perform warm-up exercises, and as I said, in dancing itself we exercise. It is intense exercise.



*With pets Chow Quay
and Tao Huay*

What are your traits that you wish to pass to your children?

Independence, to act freely, and not be hostage to someone else's ambition.

What aspects of yourself would you like to improve?

Being weak, particularly when feeling guilty. I am very harsh and judgmental on myself, and very unforgiving of my own mistakes.

If you were granted wishes, what would they be?

1. Not to grow old, so that I could live long and be healthy enough to see and experience the larger world;
2. To travel, and enjoy the arts in different parts of the world; and
3. To be a veterinarian, and save animals from suffering and preventable deaths.

Any future personal project in mind?

I would like to be involved in a performance of contemporary dance that is a new creation, full of innovation and originality. I do not aspire to be a dance teacher, and would not mind remaining a student to learn forever; I feel that there is so much to learn and enjoy that a lifetime is not enough.

If you won a million dollars, what would you do with the money?

1. Share half of it between my father and my mother
2. Use the other half to travel around the world, and also donate to efforts that help endangered species.

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