The Role of Performing Arts in the Interpretation of Heritage Sites

Wat Chai Watthanaram, Ayutthaya

Should the performing arts be used as a way of interpreting cultural heritage at World Heritage sites? The following is extracted from NARAPHONG CHARASSRI*'s thesis, 'The Role of Performing Arts in the Interpretation of Heritage Sites with particular reference to Ayutthaya World Heritage Site'. The author conducted interviews with stakeholders, performing arts professionals and experts in Thailand and abroad.*

In common usage, cultural heritage refers to cultural artifacts, both movable and immovable, as well as intangible cultural expressions, such as music and ritual performances. Even food, a daily consumable, may be regarded as a feature of a cultural tradition handed down from one generation to the next (Peleggi 2002: 2). As cultural heritage encompasses so many facets of life, both tangible and intangible, from ancient buildings to traditional recipes, it lends itself particularly well to interpretation through the performing arts.

Performing arts have played an important part in the social life of Thailand for many centuries. While there is a large body of scholarly literature on the historical, political, economic, and social development of the Ayutthaya kingdom, very little serious work has been written or published about the Ayutthaya performing arts. Even so, in terms of performing arts in Thailand, it is commonly accepted that: "The Ayutthaya period was... the heyday of Thai culture and the performing arts, and set the standard of later developments." (Miettinen 1992: 41).

The collapse of Ayutthaya under pressure from Burmese power. Dancers representing the Burmese army tower over the dancers representing Ayutthaya, showing their dominance and imminent victory. Use of red lighting to evoke Ayutthaya in flames eliminates the need for the use of real fire.

In recent years, a 'new' type of performing arts, that has its origins abroad, has come to be associated with Ayutthaya: the light and sound spectacle. The

in 1986 were initiated by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Fine Arts Department and the Governor of Ayutthaya. The organisers aimed to increase public interest in history and conservation and to instill pride (Tourism Authority of Thailand 1993). The performances, staged at Wat Phra Sri Sanphet, proved popular and attracted many visitors.

Following the inscription of Ayutthaya as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it was decided that the light and sound events would be held annually. In preparation for the event, the organisers researched the history of Ayutthaya and the role of performing arts within it. They looked into all elements of Ayutthaya's history to find episodes, stories and characters which would be suitable for interpretation in light and sound.

However, despite this wide-ranging research, performance content since then has tended to focus again and again on the glory of Ayutthaya and the tragic war which caused its fall. It seems that the organisers are still pursuing the goals which were their aims in 1984 and 1986: "To bring an awareness of the social development of the nation, and awakening the glorious past of Ayutthaya. The purpose of this event lay in creating the feeling for the historic evidence and pride in the history of the nation." (Sitthisamarn 2000: 177).

The government may be missing the point. The type of heritage to which people feel strongly is that which is found at grass roots level. When interpreted to wider audiences, it can perhaps go just as far, or even much further in developing a sense of nation, albeit a diverse one, than the grand evocations of Ayutthaya's royal past which feature so prominently in the light and sound shows.

The villagers of Ayutthaya have folk tales and ghost stories about what happened in the ancient temple complexes, but they are not being used as source material suitable for interpretation. This chance to breathe life into the ancient remains has been ignored in the pursuit of the loftier goals of classical cultural preservation. The vernacular elements of cultural expression, which are of significance to the local communities,

❶ *A PLAN OF AYUTTHAYA*

1 Ayutthaya Historical Park.
2 Area in Ayutthaya Island outside Ayutthaya Historical Park.
3 The east side of Ayutthaya Island.
4 The West side of Ayutthaya Island.
5 The North side of Ayutthaya Island.
6 The South side of Ayutthaya Island.
7 The Other part of Ayutthaya.

(Source: Fine Arts Department, Development Plan Of Ayutthaya Historical Park 1997: 123)

❷ *Ordinary life in the time of Ayutthaya.*

❸ *Phereesan (Ayutthayan ancient drummers during war time).*

are generally not acknowledged as being particularly valuable by national governments.

Little has been written about the current interpretation of performing arts at Ayutthaya World Heritage, but Black and Wall's work is revealing:

"There is a lack of will to seek out what aspects of culture are important to the local people. More than a lack of will, [our research] revealed that park administrators were unresponsive to local people who sought encouragement and support in the promotion of their own local expressions of cultural heritage. Local people attributed the reason for this disinterest to the high value officials place on 'classical' culture and the low value attached to local culture. While there is much potential for local involvement, there is little effort to secure it." (Black and Wall 2002: 12).

The authors have also critiqued that: "the Indonesian and Thai governments appear to be more interested in culture which binds the communities together, so that the government can further its goals of political centralization and control. In this respect, the goal of cultural homogeneity is incongruent with the diverse expression of local traditions." (Black and Wall 2002: 133).

As a UNESCO World Heritage site, any recommendations regarding the way Ayutthaya is run need to take into account the World Heritage Convention, of which Thailand is a member. States party to this Convention commit themselves to ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, and presentation of World Heritage properties. Moreover, they recognize that "the identification and safeguarding of heritage located in their territory is primarily their responsibility" and agree, amongst other things, to as far as

The only scene where artificial set was used. King Narai comes out to receive the French Ambassador.

Prasart Nakhon Luang. The site which King Prasart Thong ordered to be built to replicate Angkor Wat. He died before it was completed.

Battle scene between Thai and Burmese armies using real elephant actors.

Food-sellers in the market.

Food market. Flags rigged in the same manner as at a temple fair.

King Naresuan's scene, in which the importance of the Buddha is also highlighted.

1. *King Prasart Thong admires his work.*
2. *Khmer-style prang built later than Wat Mahathat at Wat Ratchaburana.*
3. *Buddha figure clad in ornamental jewellery characteristic of Ayutthaya period. Set in the corner of a corridor in the Wat Chai Wattanaram*
4. *Highlighting the sacred nature of the site. At the beginning of the performance, a mother and daughter, who act as narrators linking every scene, pay respect to the main Buddha image of Wat Chai Watthanaram.*
5. *Prang representing Mount Meru, the dwelling-place of the gods in Hindu mythology, showing the strong Khmer influence in the design of the Wat.*
6. *Burmese army, on the higher level, dominate the Ayutthayan army on the lower level.*
7. *Oarsmen rowing in the traditional style to the words of Chao Fa Khung.*

possible "adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programs" (UNESCO) (Siriporn Nanta, ed. 2000: 64).

Clearly then, the Fine Arts Department of the Government of Thailand, as representative of the state in the running of Ayutthaya, need to work to ensure that Ayutthaya World Heritage does stay part of a living community and that it is managed in such a way as to ensure its long-term preservation.

One problem concerns the way Ayutthaya World Heritage sites have been too carefully kept and 'closed off' from communities so there is, effectively, no living culture at the archaeological sites. In fact, there is a lonely, even abandoned atmosphere. The Ayutthaya World Heritage is 'out of reach' and inaccessible to the local people. This is obviously not in line with the requirements of the World Heritage Convention:

> *that nations not only protect, conserve and rehabilitate World Heritage Sites; [but] also require that these sites be given a role in the life of the community. The point is not to place these treasures under lock and key but to integrate them safely into the fabric of life" (ICOMOS 1996: ix).*

Scene celebrating Chao Fa Khung, renowned poet of the Ayutthaya period who is buried at Wat Chai Wattanaram not far from the performance space where this scene took place. It was customary in the Ayutthaya period for poets to compose their work while travelling on a boat. In this scene, contemporary dance is accompanied by a reading from Khung's work. Creative use of the building as set allows the scene to use Thai and modern movement to evoke past times, celebrating a poet of the Ayutthaya period, as well as the skills and traditional techniques of oarsmen in the Ayutthaya period.

The difficulty locals have when communicating with the Fine Arts Department is a major factor in the underdevelopment of the site and its 'abandoned' feel. This lack of both communication and pro-active management means that opportunities for local artists and performers to have a permanent space to work and perform in and so bring life to the sites have not been pursued. This also means that local performers and technicians do not have the chance to develop their technique at their own heritage site. Instead, interpretation at the site often relies on conventional forms at a time when these are undergoing considerable critique. Equally, there seems to be a lack of balance between the use of

Dance to celebrate Ayutthaya in the opening scene.

Victorious Burmese take Ayutthayan prisoners back to Burma as slaves.

Ayutthaya World Heritage for cultural and commercial purposes. All in all, the site is very under-used and there is not enough activity, information and demonstration of creativity in the interpretation. There are opportunities for developing artistic products and activities to benefit local people that remain untapped.

Wat Maha That. The Khmer-style prang is no longer standing.

At present, there is not as much performing arts at Ayutthaya World Heritage site - significantly, the performing arts are an important part of Ayutthaya's identity - that is appealing to the people of Ayutthaya as there should be, even though performing arts is well-established as a means to communicate with the mass public in Thailand. Most performing arts that takes place currently at Ayutthaya World Heritage site is in the form of the annual light and sound events, but up to now, there has been little attempt to connect the shows to the site's heritage.

Sathit Na Natee (An ancient Ayutthayan ceremony for the death).

King Prasat Thong, who built this Wat, turns to admire his work.

The performances are targeted at a mass, family audience and are not used efficiently for the benefit of the heritage site and local people. If performing arts were developed with renewed vigour, they could help promote the Ayutthaya World Heritage sites' unique attractions and make visitors' experience at the sites more memorable and enjoyable. This could be particularly effective in the long-term if two aspects were given full recognition.

Firstly, if performing arts were designed to suit the shape, character and scale of the Ayutthaya World Heritage site and, secondly, if performing arts took into full account conservation and protection planning and worked to help increase the public's awareness of the conservation of the site. There is a failure in creating and increasing an enduring interest in the heritage sites of Ayutthaya, and there is not enough interpretation to contribute to heritage appreciation.

The input from officials working at the Fine Arts Department made it clear that management practices need to be changed. A positive first step would be to bring those in charge of the site into much closer contact with the local community. Another key step would be to transfer more authority away from those at the top of the Fine Arts Department to those 'on the ground' and who are involved with and know the local communities and areas concerned even if they are of 'junior' status.

More accessible management, and management taking the step of reaching out to locals, could easily start to change the atmosphere around the site. This should help management become more dynamic and adaptable and able to take account of the input from those who live near the sites. Hopefully, it can generate a more imaginative, pro-active approach, with management taking steps to move activities surrounding the sites away from uninspiring, tasteless commercial

activities that require no thought and little organisation, and move instead towards a much wider range of activities to create a really unique product. Such an approach would potentially solve the problem of the lack of a living culture and end the feelings of Ayutthaya World Heritage sites and management being too closed off from those who live in the vicinity.

The greater involvement of locals in developing a wider range of activities at and around the site would reap a number of benefits. Linking the locals to the site would be good for conservation and for tourism; as their help can be sought in making the sites unique, more authentic and more attractive as tourist destinations. At the same time it would make for sustainable, ongoing living tourism.

Of course, this all depends on good management and organisation. If such an integrated approach is to be successfully implemented, there is a need for discernment among those who make decisions and as such it seems best if experts from all the different fields work together. At present, the Fine Arts Department just hands over responsibility for performing arts productions to commercial companies. There is no search for good directors and very little evaluation of events that do take place. These things need to change.

A possible improvement would be to create a new Fine Arts Department Interpretation department, which could lead and co-ordinate, as well as research and evaluate, all interpretation activities. This department would not work in isolation, but closely combine its efforts with those of arts, heritage and conservation professionals. This allows interested and motivated artists to get their innovative creations on the stage and help breathe life back into Ayutthaya.

At the same time, this type of organisation would be much better if they were equipped to address the questions of appropriate use and ensure that interpretation activities do not harm the site. While it may pose practical difficulties to start with, it should be much more efficient and successful in the long-term. It seems likely that by co-ordinating the expertise of people from various backgrounds who share a common goal, that goal can eventually be reached. This would also help overcome the problem of the gap between those with the ideas for interpretation and those with the power to implement them.

As the performing arts are known to have wide appeal, to engage audience's emotions and to be able to change the way people view things, they are an ideal 'spark' or catalyst which can boost interest in the sites and in other forms of interpretation. If heritage management took care to apply performing arts principles to other forms of interpretation, it is likely they too will be able to ensure emotional engagement and memorable experiences among visitors and consumers. Performing arts can also help liven up the sites and integrate them with the local community. Using areas at and around the sites for 'arts space' where performers and artists go about their work can raise tourist appeal, adding the 'behind the scenes' element, and an opportunity for tourists to enjoy a 'native' experience, seeing real locals at their (traditional) work. Increasing authenticity and appeal in this way would make Ayutthaya stand out, enhance visitors' experiences and help motivate repeat visits.

With performing arts developed thus, locals can be involved in the site in all sorts of ways: organising, participating, criticizing, helping formulate, and informing, to give a few examples. Significantly, a permanent and varied performing

arts programme can also get locals more involved as spectators and audiences at the sites and change their perception of them.

A vibrant performing arts programme can thus change the way Ayutthaya is viewed and make it much more popular for visitors. This alone can do wonders for local people's pride in their heritage and in fostering a sense of identity and belonging to a community. When the performing arts programme also emphasizes the links between locals, the site and their past, the effect will make visitors and locals feel involved with the authentic site. It can make them feel part of something special, part of the process of ongoing understanding and appreciation of human heritage. The way performing arts can establish relationships between people and heritage - involving care and appreciation - can help safeguard the site in the long-term.

Once this type of emotional connection is established, the possibilities of boosting wider awareness and understanding of heritage issues become much greater.

Performing arts can do a lot to attract investors and sponsors too. A dynamic, ever-changing performing arts programme offering a broad range of products to appeal to local and international audiences can help maintain a strong image, higher numbers of visitors and a more thriving town. It can blend the traditional and the modern, inform about heritage issues, provide a window onto the past and also make Ayutthaya a 'happening' place, an 'authentic happening place'. In other words, a place which is known for the way it interprets its past, but also uses that rich past as inspiration for new creations which live up to the city's reputation as a centre for art.

At the same time the programme need not be confined to Ayutthaya World Heritage. The wider media can also play a role in raising awareness and changing attitudes, as long as producers use their resources in the right way. One of these 'right ways' is drawing attention to the lesser-known aspects of Ayutthaya; to its lesser-known sites and its rich folk history. The whole interpretation programme should have a broad focus and steer away from being centred solely on the war with the Burmese and the major archaeological sites. A new, integrated interpretation programme should cast its net much wider, using themes to emphasize links between sites, events, culture in its widest sense and people across the map of Ayutthaya.

In conclusion, the following are key issues that need to be studied:

- Management (the way the site was run, problems of top-down management, of relations with local people and the way decisions regarding Ayutthaya World Heritage are made);
- Involvement of local people in the site: in decision making, in being involved and engaged with the site, in conservation and interpretation, making the site a part of the local community and not separated and isolated from it.
- The site has been under-used and under-developed for tourism, and measures need to be taken to transform it into living heritage.
- The performing arts and interpretation which hold tremendous untapped potential for developing the site.