

A Puppet Master Passes Away

Sakorn Yang-keawsot, a Thai master of puppetry, died of lung disease and kidney failure on 21 May 2007. His death is a major loss to the traditional art of Thailand, where the revival of Thai traditional puppetry owed much to his prolonged and sustained struggle to save this dying heritage. Theera Nuchpiam pays homage to the iconographic figure.

Formally anointed as a National Artist in performing arts in 1996 for his remarkable achievement in preserving the art of puppetry in the country, puppeteer Sakorn Yang-keawsot also developed his Joe Louis Puppet Theatre into an internationally known act and establishment.

With his efforts, Thai traditional puppetry seems to have succeeded in acquiring a “space” for itself in the contemporary world, but a question remains as to whether this artistic heritage will survive its (probably last) great master.

Sakorn was born and grew up in a family steep in the tradition of the Thai classical dance, *khon*. He was trained to perform this type of masked drama as well as *likay* (a folk musical of which most Thai traditional performing artists learned at least the basic craft). Like many of the great performing artists, he always assumed the comedian’s role in *likay*, which normally required the expertise of a versatile and lively performer.

His parents also worked as puppeteers in the troupe of Krae Saphawanich, run by “Khru Krae”, a legendary puppetry master. Sakorn had an opportunity to learn the craft and techniques from Khru



Master Puppeteer Sakorn Yang-keawsot
sketch by Pattanapong Varanyanon

Krae, and became the only artist to continue the artistic tradition set by the great master.

In carrying on this tradition, Sakorn adapted and improved on the puppets originally developed from *hun luang* (royal puppets) by Khru Krae. The puppets developed by his master were more elaborate but less mobile. Sakorn's puppetry, which has been known as *hun lakorn lek* (small puppet theatre), was more compact with three performers dancing to a *pi paat* (Thai traditional musical ensemble) tune. With the puppets mainly representing the characters in *Ramakien* (the Thai version of *Ramayana*), his puppet troupe was a clever combination of *khon* (Thai musical drama featuring only *Ramakien* as its narrative) and puppet manipulation.

Sakorn's puppet troupe became popular after World War II; however, with the development of modern entertainment such as cinemas, his art became rapidly outmoded. Puppets thereafter, like many other types of Thai traditional artistic heritage, were perceived as having their place mainly in museums.

It was not until 1985 that Sakorn and his children set out to revive this dying (or perhaps already dead) heritage by forming a new puppet troupe. The troupe performed under the name "Sakorn Natasilp" [Sakorn Theatrical Troupe] before adopting a new name, Joe Louis, which was his nickname.

Although his determined effort to preserve this traditional artistic heritage was formally recognized, his puppet theatre was not going very well. In 2004, the venture nearly had to close because of poor management; it was saved only after a press report on its difficult struggle resulted in a



*Joe Louis Puppet Theatre performers
sketch by Pattanapong Varanyanon*

fund-raising campaign to bail it out from arrears on rent payments for its venue.

The puppet master passed away at 85 years old, and is survived by nine children who are determined to carry on his artistic tradition. Some of them continue the operation of the Joe Louis Theatre at the entertainment venue of Suan Lum Night Bazaar in Bangkok, while others have formed a new troupe, “Sakorn Hun Lakorn Lek” [Sakorn small puppet theatre] at Aksara Grand Theatre (King Power Complex at Soi Rang Nam, Bangkok).

The revival of the dying art is underway, at least for the time being, despite the death of the iconic puppeteer. Now led by his son, Pisutr Yangkhieosod, the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre won the “Best Traditional Performance Award” at the 10th World Festival of Puppet Art in Prague, Czech Republic, in June 2007.

The heritage has also benefited from the conservation efforts of Thai art lovers. Among them is Newet Waevsamana, who has turned part of his house into a museum. Located in Bangkok’s Laksi District, the museum is called “Baan Tukkattoon Hunkrabok Thai” [Thai traditional puppet doll house], and it welcomes interested members of the public who share the love for this artistic tradition. The museum recently staged an exhibition of his hand-made puppets, together with a demonstration of the production process.

A graduate in decorative arts from Silpakorn University, and a victim of the 1997 economic crisis, Newet was attracted to the idea of mass-producing Thai puppets so that they were not as expensive as those he had found in souvenir shops. With no one to work for him on this mass-production plan, or to teach him how to make puppets, he set out on his own to create them.

In an effort to learn about the craft, he visited museums and libraries, as well as websites on the Internet, and bought books on the subject. After three months of trial and error, he succeeded in crafting his first specimen puppet – *chao ngao* [a character in *Sang Thong*, a literary piece in Thai literature that once provided a popular story for Thai

traditional theatrical production]. Not long after that, his business took off. With an increase in orders, he needed more people to help him produce the puppets. He taught some of his neighbours to make puppet dress, and sew beads and crystals on silk using golden threads. He also asked his friends to help with the art work.

Most significantly, Newet relied on the expertise of National Puppetry Artist, Khru Chuen Sakulkaew, to ensure the authenticity of his creative work. According to Khru Chuen, Niwet's puppets were beautiful but quite small, and hence a bit difficult to use in actual performance. Niwet was not content to be only a puppet craftsman; he also wanted to be a performer. He thus asked Khru Chuen to teach him the finer art of Thai puppetry.

Now, Newet has been in his business for a full decade. He has created more than 100 designs of puppets modeled upon the characters in *Ramakien*, of which the most popular is Hanuman, the white monkey. The puppets come in various sizes, ranging from five to twenty-three inches, with prices starting from US\$84. He is of course not interested only in making money: as a cultural ambassador appointed by the Ministry of Culture, he has presented Thai puppet shows both in Thailand and overseas.

A puppet troupe such as Joe Louis Theatre and aficionados like Newet may help to prevent the heritage from disappearing, but modern entertainment genres continue to have an impact on the artistic tradition of Thai puppetry.

That puppets continue to be made is an encouraging sign, indicating that the craft may not entirely be lost. What is even more important is that there are still puppet theatre productions, rather than the sad situation of a public admiring only specimens of life-less puppets in museums. Nevertheless, whatever the development will be, Sakorn Yang-keawsot shall have his reputation and place enshrined in the performing arts history of Thailand.

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