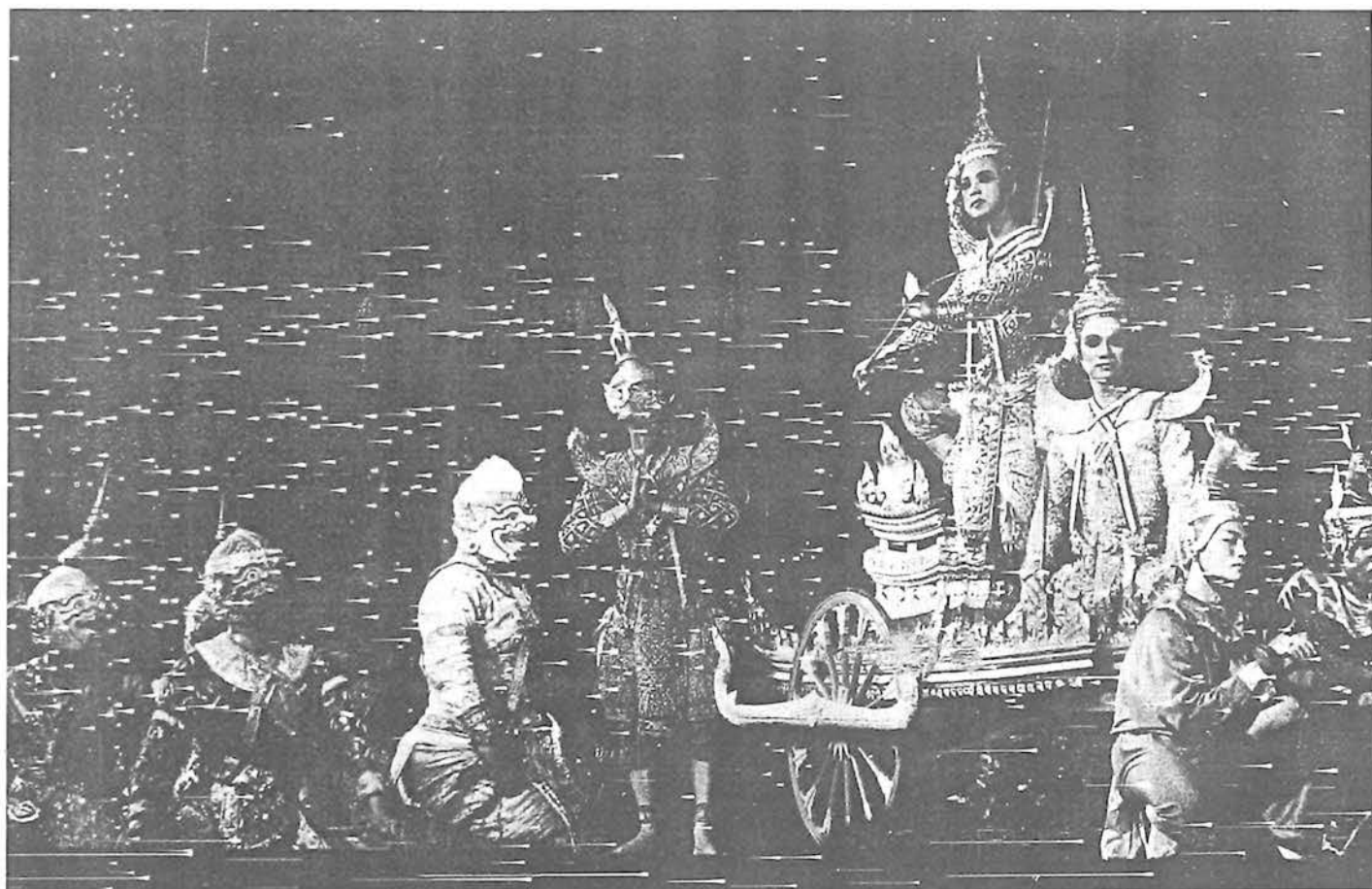


Systems of Documenting Thai Traditional Dance and Dance Drama

by Surapone Virulrak



A scene from the Ramakien, the Thai adaptation of the Ramayana.

This paper was read during the SPAFA Technical Workshop to Work Out a System of Documentation for the Traditional Dance and Dance Drama held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 18-28 July 1983.

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All the photographs used in this article are courtesy of Mr. Jukka Miettinen, Associate Expert for Culture, UNESCO.

Dance and dance drama have been flourishing in Thailand for centuries. They have been nurtured and developed in the hands of the noble as well as the plebeian. Since culturally Thailand may be divided into four regions: the central, the north, the northeast and the south, the various dances and dance dramas of the country have distinctive characteristics reflecting the culture of each region. Due to the domination of the central court, however, those of the central region developed into more sophisticated forms with rigid rules and regulations. The regional forms remain simpler yet become more diversified owing to the individual interpretations and expressions of the folk artists.

Thai dance and dance drama, through the centuries, have been handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. They have been preserved and adopted with the artists sometimes

adapting and innovating to adjust to the constant changes in the Thai society.

Characteristics of Regional Dances

Before exploring the art of memorization and transmission of dance and dance drama in detail, we will describe the significant characteristics of the dance of each region first. The court dance of the central region, which is considered classical, may be described as a series of movements in which a dancer moves in a highly formulated pattern using circular arms, angular legs and hand gestures to form a statuette-like position. It is punctuated by downward bouncing. Each position has a certain meaning known among those acquainted with it. The region's folk dance also follows this classical pattern but in a less rigid manner.

The dance of the north may be explained as a sequence of floating

sculptures. The Northern dancer uses her arms and hands mostly to form a series of sculpture-like positions. While sustaining an arm and hand composition for a longer period, she moves her legs slowly marking the tempo by an upward bounce. *Mudra* or meaningful dance gesture does not really exist in the northern dance.

The northeastern dance may be seen as a continuing whirling arms. The dancer always moves her curved arms in a continuous manner - over her head, in front, along the sides of his body - while standing on a single spot, leaning backward and bouncing downward to mark the tempo. Hand gestures depicting the northeastern mannerisms are executed occasionally.

The southern dance is similar to that of the central region except for the arm and leg positions which are more angular and more open. The chest is fully stretched forward while the bottom is pushed backward with the help of the bending knees. Body bending as seen in the contemporary acrobatic dance is therefore necessary. The dance punctuation is marked by a downward bouncing and a swift twist and stop of the wrists.

Philosophy Cum Practice of Dancers

Thai dancers of today may be classified based on their philosophy and practice into three groups: the classical, the folk or regional, and the contemporary traditional.

Classical dancers go through eight to twelve years of tortured and tormented training and apprenticeship to meet the classical standard of perfection. They dance alike because they adhere to classic patterns; in addition, they are allowed very little room for individual interpretation or expression. Only a few top teachers of each



A movement used in nora, a popular form of entertainment in Southern Thailand.

era are able to innovate new patterns based on certain classical elements. Their reputation, the respect of their students and the aesthetic quality of the dance determine whether their innovations will gradually become a part of the classical dance repertoire.

Folk or regional dancers, since they earn their living from entertaining the commoners, are different. They cater to the taste of their audience, a motivation which prompts them to modify a dance. To provide novelty, for instance, they tend to invent new versions of a dance; new and popular elements are immediately added or instantly dropped when they become out of date or do not appeal to the audience anymore.

Contemporary dancers who seek a venue to employ traditional dance elements in contemporary dimensions are rare. They are mostly the western-oriented artists who try to incorporate traditional dance elements into their performances.

They usually consult with the classical authorities regarding the authenticity of particular movements and then explore their adaptability to the modern dance. This type of dance may be described as one which combines the modern dance body-structure with



Another way of teaching involves demonstration of movements which the student imitates

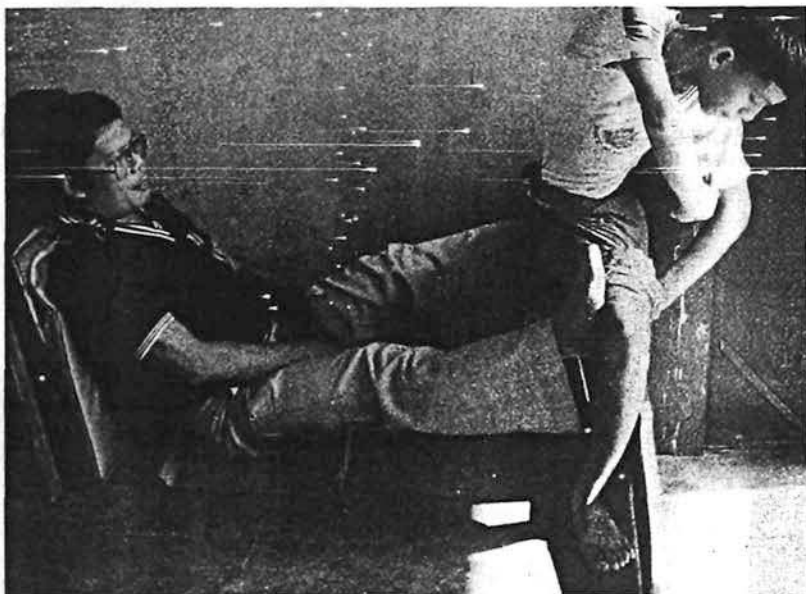
traditional arm and hand movements and positions. It takes months to create, develop and refine; yet usually remains only in the mind of the dancers since the choreographer constantly looks for something new after a performance.

Training methods

Classical dancers go through five stages of training. They start with the *ram pleng cha-pleng reo* (dance of slow and fast songs), followed by the *ram mae bot* (dance of

master gestures), *ram pleng* (dance set-piece with song), *ram chai bot* or *ram ti bot* (dance gestures utilized to amplify a text) and *ram na pat* (dance set-piece with instrumental music).

Traditionally, a person interested in becoming a classical dancer first pays homage to a dance teacher. A teacher's acceptance of the offering marks the beginning of the teacher-student relationship. Instructions are given in the classroom as well as in private. Dance instructors teach their students one small movement at a time. Only after the latter has achieved perfection of a particular movement will the next steps be taught. The teacher demonstrates a movement for a couple of times, then, lets the students imitate the dance patterns. He corrects them by hand and by giving more explanation. For better and bitter memory, he may use a stick to beat or to knock her students whenever and wherever



A dance teacher helps a young boy maintain the proper position of his legs.

they do wrong. Old teachers used to pinch, poke and beat their students, even prick them with a needle to elicit their best. Each time the students receive instructions, they start from the beginning of a piece perfecting each movement before continuing on to a new one.

When is a movement or a position perfect? In the classical pattern, every part of the body and the movement of each are precisely placed in relation to one another. The teacher sees to it that everything is correct, otherwise the students are asked to repeat the movements until they are done satisfactorily. Students who show more talent and ability are singled out when a large group of students is getting instructions.

Though this training system sounds simple and easy, in fact, it is very complicated. The dance teacher tries to digest, simplify and describe the dances by writing and by drawing the positions and gestures. Today, a dance terminology is used to note and document dances. However, this activity is more or less limited to the classical school only.

The classical dances are taught, noted and documented as follows:

Ram pleng cha-pleng reo (dance of slow and fast songs) are the first two prerequisite dances for all beginners. The gestures designed for these dances are meant to give the basic structure and positions of the body, the arms, the hands, the legs, and the feet and the synchronization and balance of all parts of the body. All dancers must perfect these dances before proceeding to a higher level. Not much time is spent by the dancers in noting and documenting the choreography of these dances.

At least 75 technical terms, the basic vocabulary of classical dances, describe each movement and position. Akom Sayakom, a great dance guru, explained this vocabulary in great detail in a material published

by the Fine Arts Department. Attempts to describe the sequences of these dances in a descriptive form as well as in line drawings are not as widespread.

Ram mae bot (dance of master text) is another prerequisite for every dancer. This dance is a series of master gestures and has two versions: the longer one comprises 68 gestures; the shorter, only 18. Tradition states that these gestures derived from India via Thailand's neighbouring countries; but the evidence to prove this is yet to be found. It could be said though that the Thai dancers had gained the concept of *mudra* from India but created their own dance gestures to suit their own aesthetic sense.

For easy memorization, the names of these gestures are rhymed. Each name is a noun phrase indica-

*Left: The gesture used in portraying a monkey
Right: Finger and arm exercises are regularly conducted to perfect the movements.*



ting a movement of some nature, for example, "the tip of the banana leaf is touched by the wind", "fish enjoys the sea" or "maiden bird flies to view a cave which is beautiful". The names clearly show that each gesture is a combination of two or three statuette-like positions such as: maiden bird - flies to view a cave - which is beautiful. The separation of this noun phrase into three sub-gestures helps the students to imagine better how each should be composed.

Dancers and artists had long exerted effort to document this dance. All 68 gestures of both male and female were painted on a manuscript with appropriate name for each gesture in early Bangkok period or nearly 200 years ago. Later, they were printed. During the reign of King Rama VI (1911-1925), Prince Damrong, a foremost historian, and Praya Natakanurak, the great guru of classical dance, jointly arranged to photograph these gestures for publication. The Department of Fine Arts re-recorded these at least twice. Some documents describe these gestures and the whole choreography of the dance but, unfortunately, they are not clearly presented and require a lot of basic knowledge to understand.

Ram pleng

Ram pleng (dance set-piece with song) is learned after perfecting the master gestures. These dance set-pieces are mostly accompanied by songs. They start from the simple and short pieces and proceed to the more complicated and longer pieces, some of them as long as 20 minutes. The training procedure is very much the same as that for the master gestures. These dances are meant to familiarize dancers with *mudra* as well as the techniques and ways to link each gesture smoothly and beautifully. Some books describe these dance set-pieces; the simpler ones are used as handbooks by dance teachers in the elementary school. The description includes some floor patterns of these dances, many of which are excerpts from the dance drama.



Emphasis of this exercise is on the correct position of the fingers, arms and feet.

Ram chai bot or ram ti bot (dance to symbolize dramatic text) is an important part of the dance drama. Dancers are required to use the appropriate gestures to symbolize the dramatic text. Each gesture may be defined as a stylization of nature. They may be categorized into five groups according to actions, emotions, nature, happenings and abstract ideas.* The actions, are coming, going, walking, hiding, etc. The emotions are love, anger, sadness, gladness, etc. Nature includes sea, street, hill, moon etc. The happenings are falling leaves, join to build something, being killed, etc. The abstract ideas are glory, great, beautiful, etc. The teachers do not train their students by categories but simply select gestures they feel appropriate to symbolize the meaning of a text. The student selected as a dance character simply imitates these gestures step by step and does not give any interpretation. To perfect the dance, a character is sometimes accompanied by four teachers who see to it that every detail is right.

*This categorization is made only for this particular workshop and is subject to further discussion.

Only a small group of people, particularly the senior dance teachers, is well versed in these gestures. No manuscripts, line drawings or explanation of this dance are available to the public.

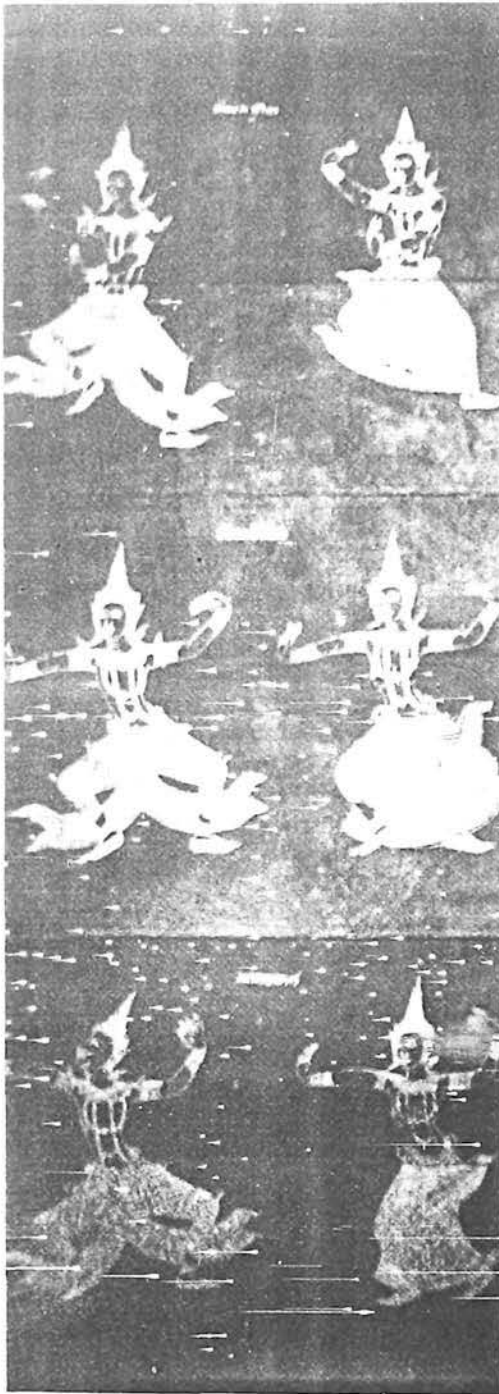
Ram na pat

Ram na pat (dance set-piece with instrumental music) is a group of dances different from the ram pleng only in two aspects: it is accompanied by classical instrumental music, and each piece pertains only to a certain dramatic character. For example, a dance set-piece called **samoe teen nok** (walk like a bird) describes Rama and a few other refined heroes going to someplace while **kook pat** (go to fight song) tells of the trip of Ravana and other high ranking demons.

The students learn this dance only after they have perfected the master gestures. Not all the dancers are given the opportunity to learn these dances however. The teacher decides whether to train or not a particular student who shows the physical and mental ability to receive such training. The dancers may write or take note of these dances for their own use but their notes are not made available to the public. This practice would have caused the loss of one dance, **roñ prapirap**, the most secret dance set-piece for a demon character, had His Majesty, the King, not ordered its documentation on film. At that time, the dance was known only to a very old teacher.

Dancers learn the dance without its accompanying music. When they study dances with lyrics, they simply sing the song while dancing and listen to the cymbal rhythmic patterns performed by the teacher. They pay attention to the drum rhythmic pattern when studying ram na pat. In the case of a simple dance, they utter the pattern themselves. The more complex set-pieces, however, require the presence of the traditional ensemble throughout the training session.

Today, the audio cassette plays an important role in teaching and training Thai classical dancers. The video cassette is becoming more



Dance gestures are recorded in ancient manuscripts.

and more important in documenting dances.

Documentation of Dance Drama

Dance drama is a vast subject apart from the dance itself. This paper will focus only on literature and performance in order to observe the system of notation and documentation.

Classical dance drama includes *khon* (masked play), *lakon nai* (royal court dance drama), *lakon nok* (common dance drama). It also covers lesser genres such as *lakon chatri* (the mixture of *lakon nok* and *nora* of the south) and *lakon pan thang* (dance drama of a thousand styles), etc. Each genre tends to have its own repertoire—Ramayana for *khon*, Inao or Pornji Cycle for *lakon nai*, Jataka or Buddha's birth stories for *lakon nok*. These examples of literature are traditionally sung and chanted by a singer-narrator or a chorus off-stage. The singers tend to deliver the text orally from memory. The memorization of the text is made easier by the exclusive repertoire that a group presents.

However, the literature of each type of the dance drama has more than one version. At one time or another, a new version might be written by reinterpreting the story line. The difference among versions is marked mostly in the quality of language and the practicality of the performance. The singers are normally adept at only one version which is recorded in their notebook for reference during the performance. Only the singers of the Department of Fine Arts sing with the text. In its every new production, the producer-director always takes the liberty of adding or dropping certain portion of the classical text to suit the new presentation. Within the recent years, the libretti of these productions have been published.

Performance of dance dramas has been recorded in many ways. The names of various genres were mentioned in ancient manuscripts: *nang yai* was mentioned in the Ayutthaya Palatine Law dated

1358 AD and *lakon nok* in the Civilian Law of 1376 AD. Ancient mural paintings which depicted scenes from various performances are still observable in many temples; photographs of some have also been published recently. Historical accounts of dramatic forms including performances and important artists are also available due to the efforts of Prince Damrong who did work on the historical development of various classical forms, Danit Yup-o who did the same for the *khon* and Montri Tramote, for the various folk performances.

Audio-visual equipment plays an important role in documenting the performance of dance and dance drama today. Reel to reel tape recordings of each production at the National Theatre are available. Unfortunately, the films of some old productions, made by foreign enthusiasts, are kept mostly abroad. Ten to twelve 8" x 10" colour photos of each production are made for exhibition at the lobby of the theatre. Video tape recordings are being used more and more with many productions video recorded and kept at other institutions like the Royal Public Relations Office, universities, television station, etc. Unfortunately, most of them were recorded in the fashion of spoken drama, that is, using medium-and close-up shots to highlight the emotions, techniques which do not lend themselves to the dance drama. The whole body movement, hand gestures and the total composition of the group dance necessary for the understanding of the dance drama are not captured in the usual way of recording video programs.

Music

Music is an indispensable ingredient of dance and dance drama. Each genre tends to have its own master tune that is used throughout the whole performance. The frequent theatre goers recognize the genre by listening to its music.

Other melodies for classical dance and dance drama are known by dancers for their particular functions such as to accompany actions and movements or to express emotions. Walking tunes, drinking tunes, anger tunes, sad tunes, love tunes and even traveling by boat tunes are examples. Approximately 400 melodies are repeatedly used in classical dance and dance drama today. Professional singers learn them by heart without any kind of notation. They memorize the note of each tune by way of memorizing the standard lyric normally sung with it. Books of some of the lyrics are available. Without exact notes, however, the singers often sing the same tune slightly differently and this poses a problem in documentation.

Classical musicians used to memorize the musical score hence did not read notes during a performance. Today numerical and alphabetical notation systems are widely used. Some attempts have been made to apply western notation to the Thai musical scale but it does not quite fit. Moreover, only a few classical musicians are familiar with this kind of notation. Their teaching and training system is very much the same as that used for the dance.

Notation and Documentation of Folk Dance and Drama

Folk dance and drama include regional forms as well, since they are recognized by the classicists and the public as such. Folk dances come in many forms. Since every large community utilizes dance as a part of their social or religious function, dance is recognized as an integral component of its cultural heritage and identity.

Folk professional dancers usually belong to the same family or related families, hence the dance knowledge is normally transmitted only among its members. Outsiders desirous of learning the dances may do so from a family with a dance tradition through apprenticeship, intensive training and stealing ideas



Above: Some dance gestures are inscribed in stones as seen in a bas relief found in Phimai. Below: Sculptures are also a source of information on how a movement should be done.



Folk dances are more easily modified than the classical ones.

from their colleagues during a performance. During their apprenticeship, the students stay with and serve the teacher who gives them dance knowledge in return. From the performances, they pick up some dances performed by their teacher or other dancers and add some parts of their own whenever they cannot remember. One other way of learning the dance is to hire a senior dancer to teach a dance set-piece intensively for ten to twelve hours.

Each particular gesture has a name but they are fewer than those for the classical dance, except for the *nora* dance form which is believed to have the same origin as the classical dances.

Folk dramas are different from the classical dance drama since they emphasize singing which is done by the dancer-actor-singer. In the classical type, the dancer and the singer are two different persons, each equally important. The actors are trained in the same system as the dancers. The former pays more attention to the verbal expression,

however. Keeping their notebooks at hand, they write down the interesting dialogue or verses they hear during a performance or they may hire an old actor to write a verse for them to memorize and to use later whenever appropriate. Books of these verses written in the form of dramatic literature based upon folklore or even classical plays are available for the novice. Many video tape recording of these folk dances and dramas were made recently by many organizations.

Music for Folk Dance and Drama

The musical repertoire for folk dance and drama is limited. Folk actors normally use only 15 to 20 tunes throughout a performance. As true in the classical presentation, these melodies perform certain functions in the performance. Although the melodies are few in number, they become an endless collection for the actor-singers tend to improvise whenever they can. Efforts to record these folk tunes have been made. One of the most comprehensive book is the 676-page doctoral dissertation entitled *Khaen Playing and Mawlum Singing*

in Northeast Thailand by Terry Ellis Miller. Audio cassettes of music for folk dance and drama are also available everywhere.

Institutions of Dance and Dance Drama

Dances and dramatic performance which require certain types of dance, such as the *nang yai*, were parts of the royal ceremonial performances since 1358 AD. Later in the early Bangkok era, the Department of Royal Entertainment assumed responsibility for all the classical performances under the guidance of a royal family whose ancestor was a great dancer. King Rama VI transferred the department under his care and established a school of dance and drama. During the reign of Rama VII, it underwent an economic depression. The Government under the constitutional monarchy revived it under the name College of Dramatic Arts after World War II. Today it offers bachelor degrees in dance and in music and has six provincial colleges.

The other institutions which are responsible for Thai dance and drama are the following:

The Division of Music and Dance, Department of Fine Arts, which is generally known as the National Theatre, presents mostly classical dance and dance drama at the theatre and around the country all year round. This department also publishes materials on dance and dance drama.

The Department of Dramatic Arts in three out of 36 teacher colleges under the Department of Teacher Training develops their students to be dance and drama teachers in high schools.

Most high schools in the urban areas provide group courses in dance, drama and music as minor subjects since 1981.

The Office of National Cultural Council with its 78 centers throughout the country provides a fair amount of budget to preserve the local dance and drama. It also publishes a large number of books on these subjects.

Dance and drama, both traditional and contemporary, are being taught in the universities. Two out

of the nine existing universities offer a bachelors' degree in theatre arts. The others are still developing their curriculum towards the bachelor's level as well.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand is also interested in supporting traditional dance and drama to promote tourism.

The Office of the National Identity under the Prime Minister's Office has taken a major step toward the preservation of traditional dance and drama. It has undertaken many researches and produced radio and television programs on the subject.

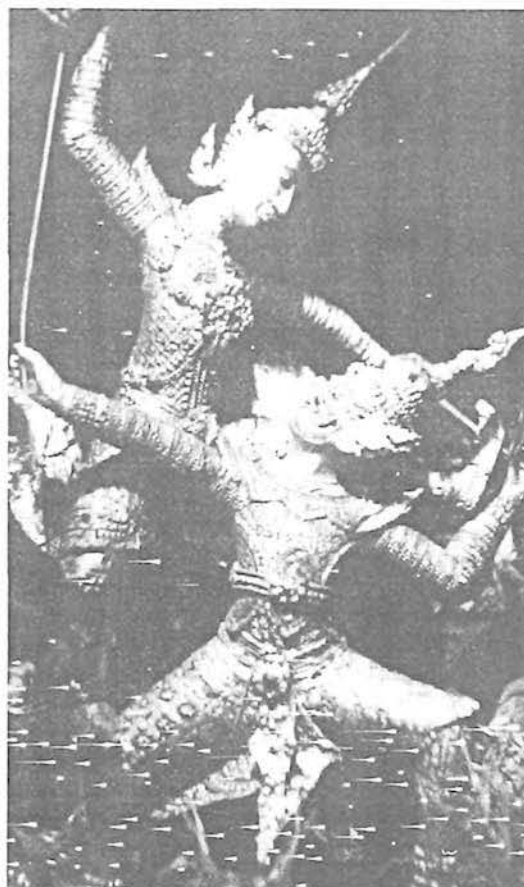
Some international organizations such as UNESCO, ASEAN and SPAFA support dance and drama as a part of their cultural relations program.

Private enterprises such as the Bangkok Bank and the Sri Nakhon Bank established a performing arts centers of their own to serve the public and to gain a public image. Oil companies like Shell give monetary support to promote public appreciation of the traditional performing arts.

Some foreign scholars and doctoral candidates did some researches on Thai dances and drama for their doctoral dissertation. However, their works are not available in Thailand.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Thai dance and drama have been handed down from generation to generation by way of oral tradition. It uses mainly the dance



A miniature sculpture showing a scene from the Ramakien

vocabulary and terminology to describe movements and positions. Some important pieces were recorded in the form of books, photograph, films and audio and video cassettes. Other records come in the form of notes made by the dancers themselves.

The dance and dance drama were institutionalized during the reign of King Rama VI. Today, many government organizations and

private enterprises undertake projects to preserve and promote these arts mainly for education, culture and tourism purposes.

Although thousands of students are studying dance and dance drama, the traditional method of training is not sufficient to maintain the required standard of excellence. Additional notation and documentation systems such as the Labanotation System should be exploited for better and faster dissemination of the dance and dance drama tradition. The cooperation of the responsible institutions should be encouraged in the documentation of this tradition in accordance with its visually aesthetic expression. In the light of modern technology, the computerization of these arts should be foreseen as the most appropriate and advanced system of notation and documentation today. It is also necessary that funds be allocated to support the artists who are the living documents of this type of performing arts.

Labanotation . . . Continued from page 12

13. *Ibid.*
14. Fernau Hall, "Benesh Notation and Choreology", *The Dance Experience*, p. 135.
15. Ann Hutchinson, *Labanotation or Kinetography Laban* New York: Theatre Arts Books, (1970), revised and expanded edition, p. 1-2.
16. See also Soedarsono, *op. cit.*, p. 23-24.
17. Soedarsono, "Penuntun Belajar Notasi Laban" (A Guide to Labanotation), a manuscript compiled by the Directorate of Arts, Ministry of Education and Culture, Jakarta, 1978-79, p. 5-6. For a thorough study of Labanotation please read Ann Hutchinson, *Labanotation or Kinetography Laban*, revised and expanded second edition (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1970),