

Dancing the Past & Present:

Lakhon Chatri Performers from Phetchaburi Province



Lakhon chatri performers prepare costume and make-up at a temple fair in Phetchaburi province.

Photo by Mary L. Grow

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For centuries Theravada Buddhism has played a central role in shaping the cultural lives of the vast majority of people in Thailand. Within a temple compound most people – villagers, merchants, politicians, performers, royalty, and ascetics – have paid tribute to Lord Buddha and his teachings through prayer and collective celebration. The temple fair (*ngaan wat*), a tradition common to all regions of the country, has always brought diverse sectors of a community together for a colorful spectrum of activities. Participants can “make religious merit” by listening to the sacred recitations of Buddhist monks and also attend a variety of performances staged to honor the guardian spirits of a temple.

Part of the temple fair tradition, *lakhon chatri* is one of Thailand’s oldest extant forms of dance-drama. Historical documents and temple mural paintings suggest that it dates back to the early years of the Ayutthaya era (1351-1767). Invocations transmitted from dance-drama masters to

aspiring performers suggest that *lakhon chatri* was originally sponsored by patrons wishing to gain the beneficial and protective powers of the spirit world.

Today in Phetchaburi Province, southwest of Bangkok, where I did recent field research, *lakhon chatri* continues to be performed as an offering to spirits. Here dance-dramas highlight the ritual practice known as *kae bon* (fulfilling a vow), in which supplicants ask a spirit for help in accomplishing a difficult task, and then pledge a dance-drama offering to the spirit if their request is granted.

I first saw a performance of *lakhon chatri* in 1986, in the courtyard of Wat Maha That, a prominent Buddhist temple in Phetchaburi Province. The temple’s guardian spirit was being celebrated at a *kae bon* ritual featuring a *lakhon chatri* offering. Dressed in glittering crowns and sumptuous costumes, the performers evoked the spectacle and glory of an ancient Siamese court. A chorus of voices accompanied by an orchestra praised the institution of kingship as the two performers portraying a royal couple slowly danced.

The mood created by this authority and elegance was abruptly broken, however, when a brash character entered the performance and began to tell risqué stories, describing the romantic exploits of the dance-drama monarch in some detail. The character, sporting a checkered snake for a headdress, improvised a comic routine replete with sexual joking and provocative play. In a moment, the comic’s antics exposed hidden passions and illicit behavior in an overtly flawless king. The audience and the chorus laughed heartily.

Irony, satire, and ribald humor are characteristic of Phetchaburi *lakhon chatri*. Performers typically build a serious dramatic scene and then, with the introduction of a joker, overturn it with humorous dialogue, slapstick, and general buffoonery.

Spontaneous social commentary regularly occurs within the framework of comic drama, a feature Thailand’s *lakhon chatri* shares with many theatri-



Jokers perform a comic routine with novice performers. Photo by Mary L. Grow

cal traditions world-wide. Through their comic improvisations, performers combine aspects of the worlds they live in and create. And meanings that audience members perceive in the dramatic action are multilayered, relating both to the unfolding dance-drama and to the larger, ever-changing, and sometimes contradictory world of contemporary Thailand.

While the origin of *lakhon chatri* remains obscure, performers claim that their art form is historically connected to the southern dance-drama known as *manora*, which is also often done as a spirit offering. The majority of stories performed by *lakhon chatri* dance-drama troupes come from the Thai Pannasa Jataka, a collection of the original 50 Buddhist tales called the Jatakas, to which 11 more were added sometime between 1400 and 1600 A.D. The story entitled "Manora" is the most popular

Jataka associated with *lakhon chatri*. Dance-drama troupes in Phetchaburi Province perform not only the Buddhist Jatakas, but also dance-dramas derived from folk tales and from the classical literature of celebrated Thai poets.

Dance-dramas usually depict exploits of ancient kings and warriors, and a highlight of every performance is a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. In these battles goodness triumphs over evil, and harmony is restored, outcomes that have ritual effect as well as moral significance. The didactic message "good begets good, and evil begets evil" is played out in a series of performances typically lasting for several days.

While the message of good and evil is common to many folk parables and epic dance-dramas, *lakhon chatri* performers have a unique way of arriving at this conclusion and revealing it to an audience. Their art of masking a character's true nature often makes it difficult to know exactly who represents the forces of good and who represents the forces of

evil. This is the crux of a *lakhon chatri* performance, and the audience must actively solve this puzzle in order to see that good triumphs over evil.

The deceptive nature of appearances is a major theme in Buddhist doctrine, which postulates that the phenomenal world of everyday experience is illusory, filled with ignorance and misconception. In *lakhon chatri* dance-dramas, performers recreate this kind of experience. They manipulate aesthetic forms to construct a set of adversaries who embody good and evil and divine and demonic qualities in complex and paradoxical ways. Heroes and heroines, who ultimately have divine power, are usually disguised as country folk, jungle dwellers, or animals. Villains, who have demonic power, often masquerade as members of royalty or as beautiful and virtuous women. As these adversaries challenge each other during a dance-drama, they resort to the art of masking. They try to dupe the inattentive with their disguise and to encourage the audience to believe that the ethical perspective they advocate is the only true one.

A performer's skill in masking not only includes overt actions like wearing headdresses and costumes to make an audience instantly recognize a particular character; it also includes the less tangible ways performers create perceptions through narration, dance, and improvisation. Comic performers in *lakhon chatri* use a variety of antics, puns, and satire to question the virtue of characters who have something to hide. As the forces of good and evil strive to create competing perspectives, comic performers respond to them, unmasking the demonic characters or stringing them along so that they ultimately destroy themselves in a moment of weakness. Comedy also masks the intentions of good characters determined to see evil avenged and destroyed, protecting them with the false personae of country bumpkins, animals, or other characters typically dismissed as nonthreatening.

Lakhon chatri performances punctuated by comic drama refer to activities, relationships, and experiences that come from a wide range of sociocultural contexts and are transformed into dance-drama by the artists. The contradictions that are a fundamen-

tal part of human existence are also played out, particularly through masking and comedy. One moment performers present a world from a particular perspective, which in the very next moment shifts. Through these paradoxes audiences cease to be mere spectators and become actively involved in sorting out apparently contradictory relationships.

Lakhon chatri performers, particularly jokers, represent themes and images that have a long history in Thai society, such as the Thai kingship. But they also incorporate newly defined desires, social attributes, and commercial forms currently popular with their contemporary audiences. These might include an imitation Rolex watch taking on powers formerly attributed to a magic crystal, or an epic warrior wooing his beloved with a ballad from the latest pop charts in Thailand. Comic performers playfully and pointedly incorporate perspectives that have never been a part of *lakhon chatri* before. In doing so, they keep pace with contemporary developments and revitalize their ancient performance tradition. But they also reveal to audience members the eternal truths inherent in the dance-drama, the teachings that transcend all represented contradictions, even those of past and present.

Lakhon chatri dance-dramas are set in an era regarded sentimentally by many people in Thailand, but comic performers playfully encourage audience members to re-examine those idealized constructions of the past. Through the improvised antics of a joker the dance-drama celebrates human action and social hierarchy based on Buddhist principle, but also pays tribute to the complex vitality of the present. As visitors to a temple fair indulge their current appetite for spicy delicacies of local cuisine and have their futures told by astrologers and soothsayers, they often experience an important part of Thailand's heritage anew through the innovations of *lakhon chatri* performers.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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