



Pramothai Musical Theatre

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Abstract

This research titled “*Pramothai Musical Theatre*” is part of Doctor of Philosophy Program in Music, Mahidol University. The researcher used the methodology of qualitative research to study the history of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*. The objectives of this research are to study the establishment of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*, its important personnel and components of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*.

The research revealed that *Pramothai Musical Theatre* was established in 1911 by *Phra Sophon Aksonkit (Lek Samitasiri)*. He established his own theatre situated in a commercial building in the south of *Charoen Krung Road* in order to organize the performance of musical theatre which used the plays composed by many poets. The style of *Pramothai Musical Theatre* was made interesting by several additional components, namely, international dances during interlude dance show, the jokers who always followed the main characters and the Chinese operas which were developed into the style of Thai musical theatre with Thai lyrics. The important actresses were *Mae Bunnak*, *Mae Chawee* and *Mae Chamoi*.

From the research, there were two important personnel of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*. The first person was *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* who was the owner of *Pramothai Musical Theatre* and who played an important role in developing musical theatre into an interesting and unique performance. The second person was *Chamoi Khangkharat (Mae Chamoi)* who was a significant actress of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*. *Mae Chamoi* was so skillful in performing musical theatre that she was praised as the best performer in Thai-style Chinese opera.

There were six essential components of *Pramothai Musical Theatre*: theatrical play, performer, theatre, scenery, musical ensemble, and song.

Key words: *Pramothai Musical Theatre*, history, personnel and components

Introduction

Human society is formed by the gathering of individuals which consequently forms a large group or a large family. The gathering is to create confidence for living and to prevent the danger from outside of the community. Each society is made different by its environment: topography, climate, etc. The members of each society must consent to have the

same values on things. Having same experiences, they are supposed to behave in the same way which subsequently became their culture.

Culture is created by humans through their behavioral and psychological learning. Humans acquire their experiences through learning and develop them into cultural patterns. These learning methods can be inherited and modified accordingly to situations, du-

rations and environment. The main reason for having culture is to create peaceful community by encouraging its member to have the same behavior toward social value, belief, lifestyle, tradition, morality, law, arts and music.

Music is a cultural heritage created by psychological and behavioral creativity of human. Music is a form of arts created long ago to serve human society. It was firstly for supporting human's mind and for communicating with extraordinary beings, namely, gods, angels, nature deities, and spirits of ancestors. Later, music was used for recreation and was used in various social activities in forms of lullaby, singing or soloing. Early songs and musical instruments were simple and could be created from natural objects found in surrounding environment. When music was later popular in many communities, music was developed into a more complex character.

Humans create music to fulfill a variety of demand, especially in social and mental issues. Concerning social issue, music plays an important role and is a part of rituals relating to the living of humans since it is used as a medium as previously mentioned. Psychologically, music is used for entertaining, relaxing and courting. Music for entertaining is in various forms of singing interactions, music for listening, music reflecting political and social problems and music accompanying performing arts. All of these can give human pleasure and aesthetic. Therefore, it can be concluded that music has an essential role in the living of mankind.

Music accompanying performing arts is an important genre of music for entertainment. This is because performing arts such as Khon, theatre, and Thai dance need music as a crucial component in order to perform. Thailand is among the countries inheriting their own forms of performing arts and it gives much importance to music. This can be viewed from the popularity of Thai music and Thai performance which lasts through all of the eras, especially Rattanakosin era where many kings have musical ability and give

so much patronage to both music and performing arts that both become truly flourished. An important example is King Rama II who was an expert of both poetry and music and who did compose many poets and theatrical plays. King Rama II also loved to play Saw Sam Sai so much that he had his own instrument named "Saw Sai Fa Faad". Another important king for the arts is King Rama VI who had great ability in poetry, music and Thai dance. He had more than 853 compositions of Khon, dance theatre, dialogue theatre and musical theatre and he himself also loved to perform in theatrical play. The plays by King Rama VI are greatly refined and outstanding in style. Musical theatres, for instance, are of original characteristic as every line is thoroughly sung without any spoken one. Concerning songs and music used in musical theatre, King Rama VI followed the regulations of Thai music strictly as he used only traditional Thai songs and Na Phad songs, which is the song accompanying the agitation of the character. As the result, Thai music and Thai dances flourish to the utmost with much development which gives the arts more elaboration, variety and innovation. This results in the transformation of dance theatre and Duek Dam Ban theatre into musical theatre.

Musical theatre is a genre of Thai performing arts which was very popular in the past. Musical theatre is the foundation of many performing arts existing in the present since it inspires the use of singing instead of speaking throughout a play. The speaking is still used, however, in jokers' parts to create amusement and prevent possible boredom. Musical theatre was invented by Prince Narathipraphanphong who was inspired by a Malay Opera called "Bangsawan" during his journey with King Rama V to Malay Peninsula. He also was inspired by Prince Narisaranuwattiwong and Phraya Thewedwongwiwa who owned Baan Mor Palace. By Prince Narathipraphanphong's creativity on musical theatre, this theatre genre was developed into a new interesting character to serve the aesthetic of the society. Musical theatre composes

of many components, namely, theatrical play, performer, costume, scenery, theatre, musical ensemble and song. Of all the components, song is the most important one since it cannot be omitted from musical theatre.

Song is a very important component of musical theatre and is the core of this genre of performing arts. Since singing replaces speaking, song plays an important role in telling story to the audiences. Song writers, knowing about this role, try to gradually develop, change and modify songs of musical theatre into the ones more suitable with the story and more convenient for singing. This attempt can be viewed in the development of songs used in musical theatres. In the earlier period, musical theatre used Kret song of Thai traditional songs. Later, the songs used were of Thai traditional songs which were adapted to suit the performance of musical theatre and there were also new songs composed specifically for musical theatre. Finally, musical theatre used Thai popular songs which were composed specifically for the performances of musical theatre. Songs used in the performances were varied accordingly to the style of each theatre troupe, which was different from each other because each troupe was established in a different period of time. Musical theatre, therefore, used varieties of songs. There were altogether 54 musical theatre troupes during the flourishing period of musical theatre. One of the troupes that was well-known was *Prince Narathipraphanphong's* troupe, known as "Preedalai Musical Theatre". Other examples of musical theatre troupes were *Pramothai*, *Pramote Mueng*, *Pratueng Thai*, *Wilai Krung*, *Chawai Wiang* and *Nakhon Bantueng*.

Pramothai Musical Theatre was among the most well-known and influential theatre troupes. *Pramothai* Musical Theatre was developed from *Prince Narathipraphanphong's* musical theatre troupe. It was established by *Phra Sophon Aksonkit (Lek Samitasiri)* who was the owner of *Sophonphiphattanakon* printing house at that time. *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* had a

theatre built at the back of the printing house (Sanga Kanjanakpan, 1980). The theatre was of the same size of *Preedalai's* and was also used for performing musical theatre. The performances, however, were different from *Preedalai* theatre. *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* put more components and attractiveness into his theatre troupe's style of performance by adding international dances as a part of interlude dances and also added Thai-style Chinese operas which were very popular at that time.

From the background and significance already mentioned, the researcher was interested in studying the history of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre, the musical theatre troupe which was popular and well-known during the flourishing era of musical theatre and which was still left unresearched. Therefore, the researcher chose the topic of "*Pramothai* Musical Theatre" and expected that the result of this study could be used as a body of knowledge of musical theatre history and could convey the method for studying other musical theatre's history.

Objectives

1. To study the establishment of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre
2. To study the important personnel of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre
3. To study the components of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre

Scope of the Study

1. Scope of the Content: The researcher presented only the content of songs found in 167 *Pramothai* plays which are gathered in the rare book storage of Thailand's National Library.
2. Scope of the Time period: The researcher presented the information of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre plays during 1911-1920.

Methodology

To conduct this research, the researcher used the

historical qualitative research method by gathering the majority of data from documents and fieldwork studies. The gathered data would be subsequently interpreted, analyzed and synthesized. Data from documentation was from the documents or memos written by people related to musical theatre, ancient theatrical plays, photos, ancient records, articles, and researches. Data from fieldwork studies was collected by interviewing informants, namely, the singers and musicians relating to musical theatre, the relatives of people relating to musical theatre, the students of people relating to musical theatre and the researchers who had studied musical theatres.

Results and Discussion

1. The Establishment of Pramothai Musical Theatre

Pramothai Musical Theatre was established by *Phra Sophon Aksonkit (Lek Samitasiri)* who was the owner of *Sophonphiphatthanakon* printing house, situated in a commercial building in the south of *Charoen Krung Road* near *Buraphaphirom Palace* (Anek Nawikkamul, 2006). He had a theatre built at the back of his printing house (Sa-Nga Kanjanakpan, 1980) in 1911. The theatre was of the same size of *Preedalai of Prince Narathippraphanphong* and held the same musical theatre style as *Preedalai*. However, the theatrical plays used were different as

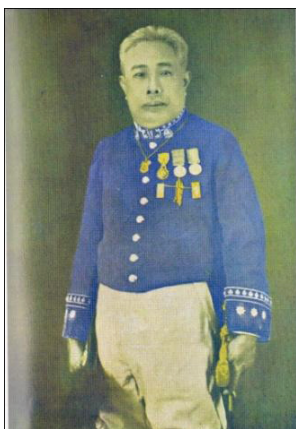


Figure 1 Phra Sophon Aksonkit
Source: Siamese Nobleman Book 1



Figure 2 Chamoi Khangkharat

Source: Memorial Book of *Chamoi Khangkharat*

Preedalai used only the compositions of *Prince Narathippraphanphong*, whereas *Pramothai* used either the compositions by other writers or the altered version of *Preedalai's* plays. Since *Pramothai* Musical Theatre was developed from Thailand's first musical theatre invented by *Prince Narathippraphanphong*, when *Preedalai's* popularity had faded and was finally closed down during the time of *Pramothai's* establishment, the main performers of *Preedalai* such as *Mae Bunnak* and *Mae Chawee* joined *Pramothai* theatre troupe and became its main performers. This phenomenon helped increase the popularity of *Pramothai* Musical Theatre. Moreover, *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* made his musical theatre more interesting by including international dances during the interlude dance show, jokers following main characters and Thai-style Chinese operas which used Thai lyrics, and main performers of *Pramothai*, namely,

Mae Bunnak, Mae Chawee and Mae Chamoi.

Pramothai Musical Theatre was well-received by the public until the introduction of cinema to Thai society. The audiences turned to cinema rather than musical theatre because the stories were enjoyable, the actors or actresses could perform suitably with the plot and cinemas' stories were easy to understand (Sa-Nga Kanjanakpan, 1980). This cinema phenomenon decreased *Pramothai* Musical Theatre's popu-

larity and made the theatre temporarily cease its operation for four years during 1915-1918. Although the theatre was re-opened in January 10, 1919, it was not well-received and finally closed down in 1920.

2. The important personnel of Pramothai Musical Theatre

There were many personnel of *Pramothai* Theatre who participated in the production of musical theatre. However, there were only two personnel whose information can be retrieved, namely, *Phra Sophon Aksonkit*, who established and owned *Pramothai* Musical Theatre, and *Chamoi Khangkharat*, who was among the significant performers of *Pramothai* theater troupe.

Phra Sophon Aksonkit (Lek Samitasiri) was born on February 1, 1874 (Anek Nawikkamul, 2006). His birthplace was a house in *Wat Thongnopphakhun* District, *Thonburi* Province. He was the son of Mr. *Sunheng* and Mrs. *Lee* but he became an orphan when he was young. As the result, he was raised by his grandmother, *Pin Juengyampin*. He studied in Thai language at *Wat Jakkawat Rachawat* School and later studied in Chinese language until he could read and write. After that, he quitted the school in order to help his grandmother in her trading business. When he was of the appropriate age for Buddhist ordination, he went into priesthood at *Jakkawat Rachawat* Temple. After he had left the monkhood, he married Miss Yin

Julwittoon who owned a printing house at *Thanon Tripetch* District. He and his wife, therefore, started running the printing business together.

The business was very prosperous and grew so much that the printing house had to be moved to *Wat Koh, Samphanthawong* District. In 1900, the printing house was moved again to a building on *Charoen Krung* Road, near *Buraphaphirom* Palace, and was renamed “*Sophonphiphattanakon* Printing House” (Tej Bunnag, interviewed). In 1906, he started another printing house in *Rachabopit* Road. The business was gradually flourished until 1912, when musical theatre was popular. *Lek*, therefore, established *Pramothai* Musical Theatre and had a theatre built at the back of his printing house in *Charoen Krung* Road, near *Samyod* area.

Lek gave himself to work as a royal page in the court of King Rama VI while he was the crowned prince. When King Rama VI enthroned, *Lek* was responsible for printing the books composed by the king. Appreciated by His Majesty, in 1923, *Lek* was entitled *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* and was given the surname “*Samitasiri*” by the king.

Phra Sophon Aksonkit had seven descendants with Mrs. *Sophon Aksonkit (Yin Samitasiri)* among which there were four daughters and three sons (*Chamnan Inthusophon*, 1976). He also had other 16 descendants with other wives. He lived until March 11, 1948, when he was 74 years old.

Chamoi Khangkharat (Mae Chamoi) was born on March 23, 1903 in *Nonthaburi* Province. She was a daughter of Mr. *Klam* and Mrs. *Lamai Roengsamran*. She studied in a school in *Nonthaburi* Province until she could read and write. When she was 12 years old, her parents gave her to the royal court under the patronage of *Princess Phakhawadee*, a relative of King Rama VI. During her service for the princess, she was trained about Thai dance and theatre until she was very skillful on the arts. Therefore, after she had asked for permission to leave the palace, she began her acting career. At the beginning, she joined *Pramothai*

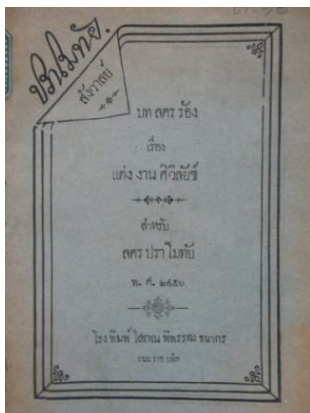


Figure 3 Pramothai's Theatrical Play

Source: The Rare Book Storage of Thailand's National Library

Musical Theatre and became its main actress. During her time with *Pramothai*, the theatre troupe was hiring teachers from western countries to teach international dances and Chinese teachers to teach Chinese opera to its performers (Duangsuda Jantarasuk, 1982). As the result, *Mae Chamoi* was trained and became an expert. Later, *Mae Chamoi* left *Pramothai* Musical Theatre and established her own theatre troupe named *Thep Bantueng* theatre troupe which had *Mae Chamoi* perform the main male character and *Mae Pramothai* Musical Theatre plays were developed from *Preedalai*'s plays. *Preedalai*'s plays, on the other hand, were all written by *Prince Narathip-praphanphong* himself.

Performer: *Pramothai* Musical Theatre was established during the downturn of *Preedalai*. This encouraged the performers of *Preedalai* to either find new career in other theatre troupes or established one of their own. As the result, there were many *Preedalai* performers who transferred themselves to *Pramothai*, for instance, *Mae Bunnak* and *Mae Chawee*. These performers became the trainers for new performing crews of *Pramothai* which made these new crews so skillful that after the close down of *Pramothai*, they could establish their own theatre troupes and became famous.

Most of *Pramothai* performers were female. However, male performers were later included in the role of jokers who followed the main male and female characters and who were portrayed as the main characters' servants. The reasons that *Pramothai* Theatre preferred female performers were 1) The miscellaneous works in a theatre troupe mostly were of costume making. Therefore, women could be both trained to be performers and garment workers. 2) Female physical appearance was delicate and could be of great advantage in attracting the audiences. 3) During the performance, there were times that being physically touched was required. Using only female performers would prevent the possible scandal and prevent the awkwardness during these scenes. Moreover, the im-

portant aspects of being a performer in a musical theatre were having beautiful and sonorous voice, clear spoken language and suitable personality.

Theatre: *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* had *Pramothai* theatre built at the back of *Sophonphipattanakon* printing house which was situated at *Charoen Krung* Road, in the southern part of *Samyod* area. *Pramothai* theatre was of big size, was splendid and was similar to *Preedalai* as there were boxes on the second floor. The boxes were on the left side, the right side and at the centre which faced the stage. The special centre box, called "*The Royal Box*", was specifically for the king, royalty and important people while the left and right boxes were for the followers. On the first floor under the special boxes, there were the rows of seats which formed a semicircle. Unlike *Preedalai*, the male and female audiences could sit together and there were also no snack and liquor bar. As the result, the people not of nobility began to be more interested in musical theatre. The majority of audiences were women because men of that period of time preferred the more modern cinema.

Scenery: Like its theatre, the sceneries of *Pramothai*'s musical theatre were splendid and modern as they were foldable and could be kept overhead. When a scenery was needed, the backstage crews would throw down a backdrop suitable for the story. This enabled *Pramothai* Musical Theatre to change the scene with great speed which satisfied its audiences. There were also side sceneries which could be move from the sides of the stage. Sceneries used in *Pramothai* Musical Theatre were of great amount of over 30 sceneries, each of which was painted elaborately and beautifully. The sceneries used the most were the living room, flower garden, city wall, palace, forest, paddy field, patio, beach, etc. Moreover, *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* did also bring his household belongings to use in some of the important sceneries to make them look real.

Musical Ensemble: Musical ensemble was an important component that could not be omitted from

the musical theatre. As the result, *Phra Sophon Aksonkit* did give a lot attention to the ensemble accompanying the performance. At the beginning, the accompanying ensemble was *Pi Phat Mai Nuam* ensemble which played along with the singers and responded to the singing of the characters. This was because *Pi Phat Mai Nuam* ensemble had beautiful and soft sound which did not shade the voice of per-

formers and which therefore enabled the performers to show the most of their singing ability. Later when some Chinese operas were translated into Thai language and were performed in musical theatre style, string ensemble was also used because it could create a better Chinese musical accent than that of *Pi Phat Mai Nuam* ensemble.

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