

**CHOREOGRAPHIC MODERNITIES:  
MOVEMENT, MOBILITY AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE  
FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

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Lim How Ngean

20 January 2014

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>SUMMARY</b>	I
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	III
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
- Ground Movements in Southeast Asia	1
- New Movements and Mobilities	5
- Modernity, Movement, Choreography	7
- Investigating Choreographic Modernities	15
- Locating the Researcher, Positioning the Research	16
- Thesis Organisation	21
<b>1. MALAYSIA: Choreographic Modernities Past And Present</b>	
- Introduction	28
- Azanin Ahmad and The Malay Dance Drama	31
- Choreographic Modernity #1: Innovating the Classical	33
- Malay Modernity Through Cultural Transformations	37
- Choreographic Modernity #2: The Tradition Will Be Televised	40
- Marion D’Cruz and Political Choreographies	47
- Politicised Everyday Movements	48
- Choreographed Contestations	53
- Remembrance, Dance, Modernity	54
- Between Different Choreographic Modernities	60
- Networks of Themes and Traits	61
<b>2. RHYTHMIC OPERATIONS: Material Description and Analysis in Dance</b>	
- Introduction	66
- Rhythm Situation #1: Sustaining Creativity	69
- Subtraction in Dance	71

- Rhythm Situation #2: Unfettered Improvisation	74
- Rhythm Situation #3: From Destabilisation to New Movements	79
- The Isolated Rhythm and Other Influences	82
- Discussion: Politics in Dance	86
- Further Aesthetic and Political Considerations	90

### **3. GESTURING TOWARDS IDENTITY – PART I: Of The Self**

- Introduction	93
- From Bangkok to St Petersburg, and Back	95
- Pointing to the Self	98
- The Emergent Self	105
- Signature and Signature Practice as the Choreographer’s Identity	109
- From Gesture to Character	113
- Monkey Modernity	116
- Between Different Selves	120

### **4. GESTURING TOWARDS IDENTITY – PART II: The Ensemble In Performance**

- Introduction	124
- Differences Yielding Diversities	127
- New Identities in Multiplicities and Becomings	130
- Of ‘Faint Becomings’	138
- Mis(s)fit Multiplicities	143
- Reconfiguring The Audience and the Performer	148
- Situated Choreographic Modernities	153

### **5. DANCING FROM JETLAG TO BODY REGIMES**

- Introduction	156
- Learning and Rehearsing Disruptions	159
- Performing Desynchronisation	165
- Stammering Towards a Minor Dance	167
- The Modern (Dance) Body	170
- Locating Modernity in the Traditional	173

- Vulnerability and Precarity	177
- Life As Usual	180
<b>6. SINGAPORE: Modernity Through Capital Mobilisation</b>	
- Introduction	187
- Accumulation of Capital: The Singapore Arts Festival	191
- Southeast Asian Cultural Capital: Esplanade	195
- Mutual Benefits	199
- Singaporean Movements	203
- Beyond Capital: Personal and Informal Ties	210
- Choreography of the Hub	215
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	
- Choreographic Modernities and Their Qualities	218
- Circular Choreographic Modernities	220
- Refracted Choreographic Modernities	222
- 'Conjunctural' Multiple Modernities	223
- Choreographic Modernities and Social Movements	227
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	233

## SUMMARY

Recent developments in Euro-American dance studies have emphasised movement as inherent to the expression of modernity, and choreography as imbricated in the cultural and political formations of the larger community and society. This thesis contributes to this line of inquiry by examining the creation and performance of contemporary dance from Southeast Asia under the conditions of globalising modernities. Emergent identities and new body techniques are impacting the creation of new choreographic practices, while the mobility born of international performance touring and foreign artistic collaborations are transforming how dance movements and gestures ‘travel’ from one form to another.

Choreographic experimentation, I contend, both reflects and produces these modernising aspects of movement and mobility to create ‘choreographic modernities’ amongst certain Southeast Asian dancers and their performances. These emergent ‘choreographic modernities’ are analysed through comparative studies of dancers from Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Bangkok (Thailand), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), and Singapore, and through the analysis of a range of dance creations and performances.

In recognition of the spatiotemporal disjunctions of modernity, the body of the thesis is ‘bookended’ by case studies in two parts of Southeast Asia with very distinctive patterns of modernisation. It begins with a contextualising chapter on choreographic experimentation in Malaysia over a period of three decades. It analyses the works of choreographers Azanin Ahmad in the 1980s, and Marion D’Cruz in the 1990s and 2000s, and highlights the impact of diverse political and sociocultural developments on their dance aesthetics and processes. The next four chapters closely examine the dances and choreographic processes of Thailand’s Pichet Klunchun, and the dancers of Cambodia’s Amrita Performing Arts organisation. Trained in classical conventions of Thai Khon and Cambodian Lakhon Kaol and Robam Kbach Boran respectively, Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are continually experimenting with their classical forms. They have also developed new

and varied strategies for dancemaking through their engagement with new choreographers and body techniques, and opportunities arising from foreign artistic commissions and the traveling this entails. In successive chapters, I focus on how different aspects of Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers' choreographic foundations have been transformed into new forms of expression that indicate a contemporisation of their dance practices. These are, respectively: variations in classical rhythm, the redefinition of gesture, the reconfiguration of characterisation, and the adaptation of performance conventions. The penultimate chapter is the other 'bookend', which analyses Singapore as a regional cultural hub with flourishing institutional arts events and venues such as the Singapore Arts Festivals and Esplanade Theatres by the Bay. It pays attention to how the city-state's cultural and social policies have given risen to its aggressive capital mobilisation that foreign artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers become beneficiaries.

In concluding, I consider how an understanding of 'choreographic modernities' within the field of dance may lead to broader insights into the processes and effects of globalising modernities on the wider social, cultural and political choreographies of contemporary Southeast Asian societies.



## LIST OF FIGURES

1.1.	Screen capture of Azanin Ahmad (centre) in the televised version of <i>Dayang Sari</i> (1979) that was shot entirely at outdoor locations	42
1.2.	Screen capture of <i>Jentayu</i> (1981) with special effects in the background where Jentayu, played by Azanin Ahmad flies through the heavens	43
1.3	The “Cilayu” scene from <i>Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya</i> , where the dancer in brown shirt identifies himself as “Cilayu”, standing with two Malay dancers, even though he is Chinese. Note the dancer, lying under the table, who is considered “Lain-lain” or “Other”. Photo by Philip Craig	51
1.4	D’Cruz (seated on table) in a scene in <i>Gostan Forward</i> where she recounts her creation process of <i>Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya</i> . The table was the same one used in <i>Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya</i> for the “Cilayu” scene. Photo by James Lee	55
1.5	The final scene of <i>Gostan Forward</i> where D’Cruz improvises with Terinai. Picture courtesy of Marion D’Cruz	58
3.1	Screen capture of dancers Sunon (left) and Padung with their respective <i>jeeb</i> in <i>Nijinsky Siam</i>	99
3.2	Screen capture of Klunchun with dancers in <i>jeeb</i> poses in <i>Nijinsky Siam</i> . Note the video projection of Nijinsky also in a <i>jeeb</i> pose	100
3.3	Screen capture of <i>Nijinsky Siam</i> of Klunchun close up holding the <i>jeeb</i>	102
4.1	Screen capture of prologue of <i>Source/Primate</i> - Hanuman with <i>jeeb</i> in the centre	133
4.2	Screen capture the first scene of <i>Source/Primate</i> showing various monkey runs and jumps. Photo by Anders Jiras	134
4.3	Screen capture of <i>Source/Primate</i> of the monkeys searching for signs of life in body. Photo by Anders Jiras	136
4.4	Posed picture of altered Khon masks and costumes in <i>Black and White</i> . Photo by Pichet Klunchun Dance Company	140
4.5	Screen capture of <i>Black and White</i> of a pair of dancers (left)	145

in a 'balance' pose, instead of fight in demon dancer supported by the monkey dancer's palm

- |     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 4.6 | Screen capture of <i>Black and White</i> of demons that begin in a fight eventually end up with 'support' gestures through the feet   | 146 |
| 4.7 | Screen capture of <i>Black and White</i> where the monkey mounts an attack on the demon while the other demon (left) seems to be tugging his fellow demon in opposite direction | 147 |

## INTRODUCTION

### Ground Movements in Southeast Asia

Contemporary dance performances in Southeast Asia are increasingly prominent, with growing audiences attesting to its positive development. Dance practitioners in the region have also gained visibility through the diversity of their choreographic forms. As dancers and or dancemakers, they make their mark through a proliferation of styles and techniques. One of the traits that is unique to Southeast Asian contemporary dance is that many of its creators have a basis in local folk or classical dance practices, be it through formal training in arts academies, or informal experiences in social and cultural communal groups.

In the vast archipelago of Indonesia, for example, complex local and indigenous cultures have produced an immense wealth of dance overall as well as distinct performance conventions within and between the many islands that make up the country. Choreographer Gusmiati Suidi (1936-2001) was one of the country's most acclaimed pioneering experimental dancemakers, specialising in the West Sumatran Minang cultural forms of Randai (Minang dance drama) and Silat (martial arts) with her dance company Gumarang Sakti. In the 1970s, choreographer and dancefilm-maker Sardono W. Kusomo (b. 1945) made his mark experimenting with classical Javanese and Balinese styles. Having worked with European theatremakers Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook and Arianne Mnouchkine, the Jakarta-based artist was later known for his environmental dances, which he worked with Dayak tribesmen in East Kalimantan in the 1980s. Miroto, (b. 1959) who founded his Yogyakarta-based Miroto Dance Company, amassed an impressive dance repertoire experimenting with classical Javanese dance and topeng (mask) performance. His international experiences range from a study attachment with the Wuppertal Dance Company under the auspices of Pina Bausch in the late 1980s, to choreographing and performing with Peter Sellars. In 2001, he performed in Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona*, a culmination of the Singaporean director's third edition of the intercultural performance workshop and laboratory Flying Circus in 2000.

I personally had the opportunity to observe the emergence of a younger generation of contemporary choreographers, including the Indonesian, Boi Sakti, at the first edition of Ong Keng Sen's Flying Circus project in 1996. Together with other classical masters and contemporary performers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, China, Japan and Vietnam, I participated in classical master classes and intercultural experimental workshops, including Sakti's movement classes in Minang Silat. Sakti is the son of Gusmiati Suidi, and took over his mother's Gumarang Sakti dance company in 2001. An acclaimed dancer and choreographer in his own right, Sakti had already amassed an impressive dance resume in the 1990s, having performed in the US, Germany, France, Taiwan and Hong Kong with his own choreographies. In 1997, he choreographed for and performed in Ong's *Lear*, the first performance of the Flying Circus projects, with his style of Minang Silat. He continued with more artistic achievements in the 2000s, including a commission with Singapore Dance Theatre for the opening performance of the new Singapore Esplanade Theatres By The Bay in 2002.

Other young and upcoming dance practitioners in the region during the 1996 Flying Circus project came from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. There was Malaysian Aida Redza, Indonesian Davit Fitriki (also from Gumarang Sakti), and Thai Peeramon Chamdavat who at that time just began their choreographic careers. Redza went on to carve out a choreographic style that used a contemporary vocabulary to explore Malay issues relating to gender and womanhood. In the 2000s, Malaysian choreographers such as Shafirul Azmi Shuhaimi and A. Aris A. Kadir have continued to experiment with the traditional Malay martial art of Silat, while Umesh Shetty has draws on the South Indian form of Bharatanatyam for his choreographic inventions. Present-day Indonesian choreographers Ery Mefri and his company Nan Jombang also innovate using Minang cultural forms incorporating song and dance, and Papua-born Jecko Siompo has impressed regional and European dance audiences with his synthesis of urban popular forms of hip-hop and breakdance with tribal Papuan and animalistic bodily aesthetics.

These forms of Southeast Asian dance have received increasing attention both within and beyond the region. International arts festivals are progressively featuring more Southeast Asian dance artists in their programming. Eri Meffry, Jecko Siompo and A. Aris A. Kadir have all benefitted from the West's interest in Asian or Eastern art forms that extend well beyond the classical and traditional art forms. The momentum of interest from festivals and audiences outside Southeast Asia does not let up, resulting in many current regional contemporary dancers experiencing international exposure, with opportunities for sustained growth in their artistic works. The upside of globalisation in exposing regional art forms to 'the rest of the world' has afforded numerous opportunities for travel, mobility, networking, artistic career growth, creative collaborations, and material and financial support for many burgeoning dancers from this part of the world.

European arts festivals such as the Kunstenfestivaldeasarts in Brussels, Belgium, Impuls Tanz in Vienna, Austria, Tanz Im August in Berlin, Germany, and Theater Spektakel in Zurich, Switzerland are supportive of diverse dance performances from Southeast Asia. Newer arts festivals in the region that focus on the cultural practices of neighbouring countries have also motivated contemporary experimentation with classical art forms. These include international Singapore Arts Festival, the Da:ns Festival organised by Singapore's Esplanade Theatres by the Bay and the biannual Indonesian Dance Festival. In fact, of late, some of these festivals have begun to enter into active commissioning and co-production projects with Southeast Asian dancers and their companies. The commissioning consideration allows for further development in terms of choreographic and aesthetic methods and styles via material funding and studio support as well as curatorial and dramaturgical support.

Elsewhere, the foreign cultural institutes of former colonial powers such as the UK British Council, the French Alliance Française and the German Goethe Institut have played active roles in encouraging local arts growth through all sorts of artistic as well as structural collaborations in countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia. In 2009, the Goethe Institut initiated a sizeable dance platform in

Jakarta under their *tanz connexions* project, which brought together dance practitioners from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia (including Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi and Umesh Shetty), Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand (Pichet Klunchun), Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. The platform contained various elements of performance, practical workshops, lectures and roundtable discussions on dance and choreography in the Asia-Pacific region. With the theme 'Transforming Tradition' the stated ambitions of the platform were:

to broaden the knowledge of traditions and current developments in contemporary dance. The countries combined through our network offer a wide range of quite different historic experiences and cultural traditions. The transformation process of tradition becoming current art with hints of the future is a special focus of this get-together.

(*Tanz Connexions* 2009, 2)

It is evident that the individuals involved in foreign arts festivals, cultural institutes, bilateral cultural initiatives, and international arts and cultural councils have been paying attention to the contemporary development and modernisation of Southeast Asian classical and traditional art forms. More importantly, these organisations are becoming proactive in developing and investing in these practices.

These general observations are borne out by the fortunes of the artists whose work will provide a central focus of this thesis. In terms of commissioning and co-production efforts, Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun and his eponymous dance company have enjoyed international recognition since Klunchun's involvement with Ong's third Flying Circus project in 2000, which led to his participation in international performances of Ong's *Global Soul* (2003), and the widely-travelled *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2006) with Jérôme Bel. In 2010 he premiered *Nijinsky Siam* at the Singapore Arts festival. The festival co-produced and co-commissioned with work with the Theater de Welt theatre festival in Mannheim, Germany, and further touring support took the piece to Theatre Spektakel and Nooderzon festival in Groningen, Netherlands. Following this success, Singapore's Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay commissioned Klunchun to create *Black and White* for its Da:ns Festival in 2011. Again, it toured to many European festivals.

Meanwhile, Phnom Penh-based non-profit organisation Amrita Performing Arts, which began as a collective to preserve classical Cambodian performance forms, has since received various kinds of financial and material support from international festivals for their contemporary experimentation. Their most impressive commission to date is *Crack*, choreographed by Arco Renz for the 2011 Singapore Arts Festival 2011. The production was an international collaboration with touring support from the Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia and The Flemish Authorities enabling it to tour Belgium, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland.

### **New Movements and Mobilities**

This thesis focuses on the choreographic works and strategies of highly mobile dance practitioners, and how they are creating dance works beyond their classical training. It does this by examining the experimental works of Pichet Klunchun and the dancers from Amrita Performing Arts. They represent recent Southeast Asian artists who have benefited from a range of opportunities due to their global mobility: including performance tours, access to international funding, and exposure to new dance training and body techniques.

It is sometimes assumed that as a result of the flattening and homogenising impacts of globalisation, where the more artists tour and travel, the less differentiated their works or art forms become. Pichet Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are certainly attracting the attention of festival programmers and curators as well as international audiences. However, as I hope to show in this thesis, thus far, they have carved out unique artistic and creative positions in their work, based on their expertise and skill in classical performance forms. Klunchun and his company are trained in the Thai classical Khon, and the Amrita dancers are trained in the Cambodian classical forms of Lakhon Kaol, Rombam Boran, and various folk traditions.

While there are many emerging choreographers and dancers who boast classical or traditional dance backgrounds in Southeast Asia, globalisation has impacted on how dance is learned and practised in the region. The

‘internationalisation’ of the arts has permeated areas of education, in some cases enabling young Southeast Asian dance artists to pursue their training and further education outside their home countries. Acknowledging a larger and more varied dance ‘industry’ in the West, more aspiring dancers are turning to the US and Europe to train in ballet, and modern or contemporary dance and performance. In addition, in the face of international competition, budding dancers armed with Western dance techniques and training perceive an opportunity to compete on a ‘level playing field’. Meanwhile, an increasing number of foreign choreographers and companies like Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the late Pina Bausch (Wuppertal Dance), Netherlands Dance Theatre, Nacho Duato, Akram Khan and Alain Platel have extended their recruitment to include Asian dance talents.

Practitioners such as Klunchun and the Amrita stable of dancers prefer to work with and through their classical training in creating new performances. The ways and means in which they wield their classical skills and virtuosity to experiment in dance also position them as unique amongst peers and colleagues who are also experimenting with local cultural forms. Their global mobility is an important differentiating factor, and in this thesis I will give consideration to the effects of their touring and travelling as they make and perform dance. Not only do they travel to different geopolitical and geocultural locations to perform, their dance movements and gestures ‘travel’ and transform as they encounter new dance techniques, aesthetics and modes of expression.

This happens in a variety of ways. For instance, Klunchun, whose experimentations began in 2000, has thus far mostly choreographed his own works on home ground in his Bangkok studio, while garnering experience performing abroad with other collaborators. The extensive international success of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* put the spotlight on Klunchun’s classical form, and his journey as an artist from his home country to confront foreign audiences. As we shall observe later in the thesis, Klunchun’s subsequent solo and company performances exhibit similar narratives that were in part motivated by *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, along with other choreographic innovations.



Conversely, starting in 2006, the Amrita dancers have worked constantly with international choreographers, and these projects have taken them to locations far away from their Phnom Penh homes to the US, Belgium, Canada, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, to name but a few. This unique position as an arts organisation without an artistic director means that the foreign choreographers Amrita collaborates with transmit a wealth of new and diverse bodily techniques and choreographic strategies.

The difference and similarities between the artistic positions of Klunchun in Thailand and the Amrita dancers in Cambodia present rich critical material that suggest ways into understanding how they change and innovate their classical dance movements into new forms of expression. Moreover, just as this thesis critically analyses new choreographies fuelled by individual and local motivations, it also examines the impact of different 'outside' influences on the movements and gestures of these artists as they encounter diverse aspects of dance performance and creation in a globalised environment.

### **Modernity, Movement, Choreography**

At this point I would like to clarify how the term 'modernity' will be understood and applied in this thesis. Broadly, there are two intertwining strands of the argument that will act as 'umbrella understandings' of modernity throughout. From a philosophical perspective, I turn to the relationship between modernity, movement and dance as elaborated by dance scholar André Lepecki in response to Peter Sloterdijk's conception of modernity as movement and mobility. Sloterdijk contends that modernity is "constant movement toward movement, movement toward increased movement, movement toward an increased mobility" ([1989] 2009, 5). For him the essence of modernity, the ontology of modernity, is "being-toward-movement" (quoted in Lepecki 2006a, 6): as humans, we move to be modern. Building on this argument, Lepecki then proposes that dance is an art of modernity: "[d]ance accesses modernity by its increased ontological alignment with movement as the spectacle of modernity's being" (2006a, 7).

If movement and mobility are inherent to modernity, and dance constitutes itself through movement, then dance is the very expression of modernity. By virtue of “being-toward-movement” the dancer would also constitute an exemplary figure of modernity. I argue that the dancer in movement advances toward modernity, producing a ‘dance-toward-modernity’. The dancer reaches for modernity through the movements and gestures, narratives and aesthetics of dance. Lepecki adds that to choreograph “would then be to enter in the kinetic (im)pulse of modernity” (2006b, 18-19). I will discuss this intersection of dance, movement and mobility in further detail in a later chapter, when I examine the performances and choreographic processes of the Amrita dancers in relation to global mobility.

As Klunchun and the Amrita dancers’ works and processes are grounded in cultural contexts because of their classical practices, it is also necessary to turn to a social and cultural perspective on modernity. I am persuaded by Gaonkar’s argument for “alternative modernities” (2001), where different modernities occur and exist, resulting in a plurality of experiences in modernity. He qualifies that “modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a governing center or master-narratives to accompany it” (2001, 14). This echoes the positions of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers who arguably become ‘global’ in their mobility in order to find new ways of engaging and performing their classical forms and conventions. As they cross national and geopolitical boundaries, they also cross their own cultural boundaries into other cultures, Western or otherwise. Their “master-narratives” of performing as solely local classical artists or masters shift and transform with new cultural, artistic and aesthetic encounters that feed into their experimental choreographies.

Additionally, Klunchun and the Amrita dancers experience multiple modernities in their daily lives that are linked to their cultural practices. As Gaonkar states, “hybrid modernities” (2001, 14), based in part on the effects of Western modernity on local social, cultural, economic and political conditions, are still being experienced everywhere, and this is especially true in the countries of Southeast

Asia. These “hybrid modernities” exhibit particularities that are specific to different locations, even in neighbouring instances. Thailand and Cambodia may share a common border, on the Thai northeastern side and the Cambodian west, but their divergent yet intersecting political histories have resulted in very different “hybrid modernities”. After decades of political upheaval in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including the genocidal period of Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979, Cambodia is catching up on economic development with the rest of the Southeast Asian region, while Thailand has seen relatively stable economic growth for the past four decades. However, Thailand’s political instability could have some economic repercussions on the country. For example the most recent clashes between the “Red Shirts”, supporters of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and its present prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, who is Thaksin’s sister, and the “Yellow Shirts”, who are opposed to the Shinawatra leadership, continue to leave the country in periods of social, political and economic instability.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of rapid economic development, cultural preservation is channelled into contributing to the nation’s cultural and tourism industries. For example, in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Klunchun’s speaks of Khon being relegated to dinner entertainment for visitors in international five-star hotels and premium restaurants. Indeed, my first encounter with a Khon performance was under just such circumstances – at the Salathip restaurant in the five-star Bangkok Shangri-la Hotel in 2002, where traditional Thai dishes were served in a teak pavilion. The true ‘star’ of the evening was the delectable meal, while the Khon performance played a complementary entertainment role.

Similarly, the annual gala premiere of Thai Queen Sirikit’s birthday Khon performance serves as a social event attended by the country’s influential business, political and royal elite. The Thai queen’s command Khon performance is seen more as a parlay of cultural and social capital for the upper echelons of society than a celebration of the cultural form itself. From an aesthetic point of view, the royal

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the “Red Shirts” and “Yellow Shirts”, see Ungpakorn’s ‘Class Struggle Between the Coloured T-Shirts in Thailand’ (2009).

Khon performance makes an impressive showing on a large proscenium with cutting edge stage, lighting and sound technology while other technology-based ‘artistic innovations’ are showcased in these extravagant spectacles. For instance, there are the “flying Khon” acts where magical characters are strapped to fly wires so that they ‘fly’ onto stage or hover just as celestial beings in the myths acted out “should”. This attests to the modern technological advancements of the classical form above, but when I had the opportunity to watch the performance myself, I found the quality of the performers in their movements and gestures to be lacklustre.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, in addition to experimenting with Khon, Klunchun and his company regularly perform the classical form in his modest studio space in the suburbs of Bangkok for the immediate community. Criticising the present situation of Thai cultural performances as tourist entertainment<sup>3</sup> Klunchun also committed to finding ways of developing the classical form to suit contemporary sensibilities and the aesthetics of increasingly urbanised and metropolitan Bangkok residents. In *Pichet Klunuchun and Myself* the choreographer remarks:

First, I want to bring young people in Thailand to see and appreciate their tradition. Second, I want to invent my own dance movements that are still connected to Thai tradition.

(quoted in [2009] 2012, 218)

Due to Klunchun’s intimate knowledge of and expertise in a classical convention he has spent more than 20 years learning, teaching and perfecting, there is a deep sensitivity to the subtleties and nuances of his art form, its history and its potential for experimentation. Instead of turning solely to mechanical technology to innovate the aesthetic form of Khon, Kunchun gives careful consideration to other aspects that are more intimately linked to the practice, such as its cultural and political history, the detailed aesthetic development of gestures and characterisation, and, its complex choreographic structures.

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<sup>2</sup> While I do not claim to be an authority on the complexities of what is considered a superior Khon performance in its numerous aspects of movement, gesture, song and music, the evaluation and judgement made is here is based on my comparisons with Pichet Klunchun’s and his dancers’ classical Khon performances along with exemplary video recordings of other Khon performances.

<sup>3</sup> In his dialogue with Jerome Bel in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*.

Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh is presently playing economic 'catch-up' with its neighbours: the cityscape is changing fast, with many high-rise shopping malls and premium condominium projects. It also boasts a private country club – the Cambodian Country Club, opened 2009 – alongside booming five-star hotels that cater to foreign holiday-makers and business travellers alike. Just 10km northeast of the premium country club lies Boeung Kak Lake, from whose environs 4,252 families were evicted in 2007 when the lake was bought over by a construction company headed by a Cambodian senator (Shakespeare 2013). As highlighted by Nicholas Shakespeare, in his article 'Beyond the Killing Fields' in the online magazine *Intelligent Life*, land rights is presently one of Cambodia's most pressing issues. He adds that an estimated 700,000 people have been evicted from their homes since 1998 when the Khmer Rouge laid down their arms, and that 63% of all arable land handed out to private companies is controlled by a government "saturated with ex-Khmer Rouge" (2013).

Alongside booming manufacturing and trade activities, tourism is also lucrative for Cambodia, with its historic Angkor Wat sites, also the UNESCO Intangible Heritage listing of its classical Khmer dance (better known as the Royal Cambodian Ballet), and traditional large puppetry called Sbek Thom. At the same time independent Khmer arts initiations such as the Sovanna Phum Art Association, barely able to pay rent, is housed in a small space at the edge of the city centre that charges just US\$5 for short classical dance and Sbek Thom (Cambodian shadow puppetry) performances. The association can only pay US\$6 to their performers due to modest audience attendance.

The city's performing arts academies have also recently come under fire for their lackadaisical attitude toward the teaching and training of Khmer classical art forms. Chey Chankethya suggests various reasons for this situation, from dissatisfied masters who are underpaid, to cultural politics within the network of government officials (2010, 26-39).<sup>4</sup> As a dancer with non-profit organisation Amrita Performing

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<sup>4</sup> This will be further discussed and elaborated in Chapter 5.

Arts, Chey (better known as Kethya), who is skilled in classical Cambodian dance, is also carving a name for herself in contemporary dance just as she continues with her classical practices. Founded in 2003, Amrita is a multi-disciplinary performing arts organisation that was initially established to preserve and promote Cambodian forms but has included the development of contemporary dance and theatre stemming from traditional practices as part of its mission. While it garnered attention and visibility by touring classical Cambodian repertoire work, the organisation has grown to include a number of contemporary Cambodian dance and drama works that tour frequently outside the country.

In the midst of the race for local cultural preservation there are also cross-cultural nationalist tensions that further complicate the background context to my focus on Pichet Klunchun and Amrita in this thesis. For instance, there is the ongoing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the UNESCO World Heritage site Prasat Preah Vihear temple, situated near Thailand's eastern and Cambodia's northern borders. While the International Court of Justice ruled that the temple belonged to Cambodia in 1962, armed clashes in 2008 and 2011 killed more than 20 people. In 2013, ownership of the site was still being contested (Tan 2013, 22). Cultural disputes that inevitably become nationalist causes between the two countries have also seen them rallying to claim the classical gesture *jeeb*, which features in both Khon and Robam Kbach Boran and Lakhon Kaol. In 2011, following the 2008 recognition of Cambodian classical dance and the listing of several hand gestures as being of Cambodian classical heritage under UNESCO's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' scheme, Thai Culture Minister Sukumol Kunplome launched a campaign to get the *jeeb* registered as Thai.<sup>5</sup>

The various instances above provide complex and layered images of multiple and hybrid modernities where modernising economic, capitalist and nationalist considerations impact on local livelihoods and cultural politics within and between countries like Thailand and Cambodia. These complicated issues illustrate elements

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see 'Thailand Wants to Take Back the Jeep' (2011) and Sok-Halkovich (2011).

of social and cultural “disembedding” that Giddens (1990, 21-29) warn of in arguing against globalising modernities, such as money, that creates unequal distributions of wealth across socio-economic communities. Appadurai also cautions of the “disjunctures” of globalisation (2001, 5-7) that may end up causing more social injustices and sociocultural imbalances. Yet artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers reconfigure some of the same circumstances that are otherwise fraught. For instance, the *jeeb* heritage debate between Thailand and Cambodia may sound trifle and insignificant but there is a certain amount of seriousness attached to it for the wider society. Cultural significance is attached to the *jeeb* but it has also been appropriated into nationalist discourses. These dancers, on the other hand, benefit from this aspect in a different way by re-directing it towards more creative means and ends to develop their dance works. In doing so, they seek alternative ways to balance the preservation and promotion of their classical heritage in their modern societies on one hand, and developing and experimenting with their classical conventions for those same modern audiences on the other.

With the intertwining arguments of “alternative modernities” and ‘dance-toward-modernity’ in mind, this thesis examines the different modernities that impact on the experimental works of Klunchun and the collective of Amrita dancers. As they create and perform new choreographies, the dancers undergo modern transformations in their choreographic styles, aesthetics and narrative content. These transformations are the results of their encounters or contact with different features of modern life. Yet it is the movement of dance and choreography that facilitates their access to artistic and cultural modernisation and modernity, locally and globally. Their many distinct ways of enacting ‘dance-toward-modernity’ within complex contexts of rapid modernisation comprise what I term ‘choreographic modernities’.

This, in turn, brings the word “choreography” under scrutiny. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines the word “choreography” in two concise ways: “the written notation of dancing”, and “the art of dancing”. Subsequently, the word “dance” is also defined in two ways by the *OED*, with the second definition being of

particular significance in this discussion: “a definite succession or arrangement of steps and rhythmical movements constituting one particular form or method of dancing”. In the context of other languages, the word “choreography” can be a composite of terms. For example, the term for “choreography” in Cambodian language also refers to “dance”, which is *nead kam*, where *nead* refers to the verb “to dance” but the suffix *kam* turns it into an abstract noun. As for “choreographer” the Cambodians use another word for dance, which is *robam*, to construct the term *nak dom loerng robam* to mean “a person who installs or builds dance.” In Thai, “choreography” is *gaan ok baep taa dten* which literally translates as “to produce design, poses and dance” while “choreographer” is *nak gaan ok baep taa dten*, meaning “a professional who designs postures and dance”.

Perhaps it is the oral and corporeal tradition of dance pedagogy in Thai and Cambodian cultures that aligns these ideas about choreography with to the western meaning of dance. Formats of notating and documenting dance movements, such as Labanotation, are not used in Asian or Southeast Asian classical dance conventions. Having said that, dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster writes that the present usage of “choreography” in its numerous interpretations included to mean “the unique process through which an artist not only arranged and invented movements, but also melded motion and emotion to produce dance” (2011, 44). Although she refers to the early American “new, modern dance” movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea of “arranged and invented movements” closely echoes the Thai and Cambodian terms for “choreography”, which emphasise acts of inventing, designing, installing, and arranging movements.

If choreography is defined throughout this thesis as the arrangement and invention of movements to produce dance, then choreographic modernities suggest modernities that take on the qualities of choreography. By this I mean they are formed out of dance, performed and made by the dancers. They begin as classical performance elements such as a particular rhythm, hand gesture or character that then change, transform, or are re-organised, as a result of the dancers’ encounters with different modes and elements of modernity. These choreographic modernities



then go on to produce entire performances that exhibit new dance aesthetics and modes of expression. This is most apparent in how globalisation and transnational mobilities have directly impacted Klunchun and the Amrita dancers' way of dancing and choreographing. Their mobilities in turn result in cumulative encounters with other modern technologies such as new body techniques and choreographic styles. These new technologies and knowledges do not stop at informing and transforming how the dancers move in and make performances. Their encounters with modernising elements in movement (choreography) and mobility (globalisation) effect changes in their artistic products and processes to form choreographic modernities.

### **Investigating Choreographic Modernities**

Throughout this thesis, Klunchun and the Amrita dancers' specific performances will be presented as case studies to support my argument about the emergence of choreographic modernities. In addition to particular performance analyses, I will also be drawing from specific moments in their creative process, and details of their rehearsal methods to reinforce my arguments. Final products of performance only constitute a fragment of a performer or performance-maker's creative and artistic efforts. The work processes of creating and rehearsing before the finished product reveal just as many aspects of how the dancers' choreographic modernities are discovered and occur. Choreographic modernities are not merely ultimate products in a performance, they can be continual processes that change and transform, leading to a completed gesture, a series of movements or particular characterisations on stage. As such, in the following chapters, choreographic modernities occur by a range of means, from material and physical manifestations of hand gestures, to internal conceptions of dance and other bodily rhythms, to constructions of performance dramaturgy and narratives.

In addition to the distinct ways these dancers are modernising their classical art forms that will be the focus of the thesis, I will argue that they possess particular artistic features that are unrivalled by their Southeast Asian peers and colleagues. I argue that Klunchun and the Amrita dancers frequently and productively capitalise

on these globalising tendencies in effectively facilitating their artistic development and growth. Klunchun has toured more than 50 venues around the world performing in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* while his subsequent dances almost always travel right after their premieres. The Amrita dancers, on the other hand, have yet to work with a Cambodian choreographer in their experimental efforts. For now they mostly refer to foreign collaborators as a sharp contrast to their locally bound classical training. They are continuously amassing multiple methods to and processes in contemporary dance.

### **Locating the Researcher, Positioning the Research**

The uncovering of diverse choreographic modernities inevitably raises questions about my own position as a researcher in this thesis. My relationships with Pichet Klunchun and Amrita Performing Arts go beyond those of a disinterested observer offering the subjects as case studies in this thesis. Although I have experienced both Klunchun's and Amrita's dance performances as an interested audience member in the past, I have also work as dramaturg on some of their productions. I worked as dramaturg on Amrita's productions of *Khmeropedies I & II* (2010) and *Khmeropedies III: Source Primate* (2013), and also on Klunchun's *Black and White* (2011). This thesis therefore draws on my spectatorial observations and also on my work experiences with Klunchun and Amrita's guest choreographer, Emmanuèle Phuon.

My participation in the works above varied in degrees as I was invited to contribute and assist in improving an initial draft of *Khmeropedies I & II* whereas I began dramaturgical work on *Black and White* and *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* at the start of the projects. I worked closely with Phuon in rehearsal for *Khmeropedies I & II* for certain segments that she ascertained as needing dramaturgical input while I assisted Klunchun and Phuon with initial textual research on *Black and White* and *Source/Primate* before rehearsals started. I was not present at the very start of studio improvisations for the latter two projects, but I did spend considerable periods of time at rehearsals to contribute – and more importantly for

this thesis, to observe – critical aesthetic and movement developments of some of their choreographic modernities.

I spent a total of five weeks in rehearsal with *Black and White*, and three weeks on *Source/Primate*. I worked closely with Klunchun and Phuon respectively on refining specific scenes and segments, in addition to working on overall performance flows for both shows. Although I only spent a week with Phuon on refining and improving certain scenes for *Khmeropedies I & II*, I had the opportunity to gain certain insights into how some of the Amrita dancers were working in relation to their classical forms. As it was also my initial step into working with Amrita Performing Arts, I also had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the organisation and some of the dancers in both professional and social contexts.

This thesis is informed by my privileged position as someone with with ‘participatory insider access’. Yet this access differs from one dance project to another. While there is no denying my critical and practical contributions during rehearsals as dramaturg, I focus here on the privileged ‘closed door’ observations afforded me for this thesis. These sessions shed particular insights into how choreographers respond and react creatively when they encounter problems that arise during the process of making and creating dance. For instance in Chapter 2, I highlight examples of how choreographers and dancers create or discover new dance vocabularies as they use familiar dance rhythms in creative ways during rehearsals. This thesis analyses the creation and performance of contemporary dance from Southeast Asia. Therefore it is a conscious decision to concentrate on the transformative processes of dance gestures and practices by dancers whom I observed closely. Consequently, this thesis represents a contribution to the observation and documentation of creative strategies by Southeast Asian contemporary dance practitioners, which are presently lacking in scholarly writings.

Having said that, I have not restricted my observations to the various ‘behind the scenes’ phases of the performances in which I was a dramaturg. In order to articulate the nature of specific choreographic modernities, I draw equally from the

completed performances, including the analysis of specific scenes and segments. Since, as I proposed earlier, elements of choreographic modernities appear and occur in different forms and stages of dance, different chapters will range from a discussion of the specifics of a gesture, to particular scenes within a performance, to the meanings and effects of entire shows. Certain chapters also examine performances by Klunchun and the Amrita dancers in which I did not participate creatively. My role(s) in the performances or rehearsal processes illustrated in the chapters will be clarified within each chapter as these illustrations differ from one another – as with my role – depending on the argument(s) I make.

There is also the element of comparative examination and analyses across the works and choreographic processes of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers in this thesis. This allows for a richer and broader understanding of the workings of their respective choreographic modernities, since these modernising aspects do not occur randomly or exist in isolation. Similarities in choreographic modernities across the works of these dancers may also have broader implications for how dance is made and examined in this region. Although the various cultures in Southeast Asia produce separate artistic practices based on their classical conventions, there are nevertheless resemblances that can be observed. Regions of the countries presently known as Thailand and Cambodia have shared sociocultural and political histories for many centuries. The classical conventions of Khon, Robam Kbach Boran and Lakhon Kaol draw on the Ramayana narrative tradition, and possess similar physical vocabularies and aesthetic characteristics, including accompanying music and costumes. Dance historians have frequently rehearsed debates on the authenticity of one or other cultural form and its influences over time. While it is pertinent to acknowledge and examine the role of traditional practices in this thesis, the classical forms are discussed and analysed in relation to their role in the experimental choreographies of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers. Hence, rather than providing an extensive historical discussion here, I will instead address the sociocultural and aesthetic contexts of the dancer's various classical training and practices in precise relation to each argument and analysis presented in later chapters.

The illustrations of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers suggest a particularly concentrated examination of choreography and classical dance in a region that exhibits diverse cultural and aesthetic practices. Yet we can draw on some of the commonalities between the work of the Thai and Cambodian dancers featured here to infer insights into other dance practitioners in the region. As anthropologist Mary Margaret Steedly writes, the cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia are increasingly being understood as “open, plural, contested interpretive spaces rather than as a collection of discrete, bounded cultural entities” (1999, 440). Another ‘broadly similar yet minutely distinct’ example is the classical forms of the Malay archipelago, where dancers such as Indonesians Boi Sakti and Eri Mefry, and Malaysians Shafirul Shuhaimi and A. Aris A. Kadir practise variations on Silat according to their sociocultural frames and conventions.

Such connections underscore my own interest in dance dramaturgy and scholarship, which were fuelled by my early experience and training in contemporary performance. For the past 20 years, I have worked as a performer in Singapore as well as Malaysia, with a particular focus on intercultural and physical theatre. Working with director Ong Keng Sen in the early 1990s set the stage for my growing interest in the performing body.<sup>6</sup> This culminated in my participation in Ong’s inaugural Flying Circus project in 1996 where I experienced diverse traditional performance forms from the Asian region. More than a series of intense physical training workshops in these forms, the Flying Circus Project also consisted of improvisation workshops and ‘laboratory’ sessions. In these sessions, contemporary performers such as myself would experiment together with traditionally trained artists to create new physical aesthetics that could qualify as contemporary intercultural theatre or performance. The classical or traditional Asian participants in Flying Circus were predominantly dancers and choreographers, which intensified my

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<sup>6</sup> From 1994 to 1996, I was involved in milestone productions with theatre company Theatreworks Singapore (established 1985) of which Ong is still artistic director. I was involved as a performer in *Longing* (1994), *Broken Birds* (1995), *The Yang Family* (1996) and Flying Circus project. Ong had just returned to Singapore from his MA studies with New York University’s Performance Studies in 1994 and began to direct large-scale performances that emphasised on themes of marginalised histories and communities in the country. The productions were site specific that focused physical performances.

budding curiosity in dance, especially in the classical genres of the region and the kinds of modern and contemporary innovation that was occurring with them at the time.

A Malaysian who underwent my undergraduate studies and initial work experience in Singapore, I returned home in 1997, where I began working with inter- and multidisciplinary arts collective Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur. There I continued my performance and theatre trajectory with director the late Krishen Jit (1940-2005), and choreographer Marion D’Cruz, who both focus on multicultural politics in dance and movement theatre. As a collective, Five Arts also emphasised training in various traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian body techniques and art forms as a basis for its contemporary performance experimentations.<sup>7</sup> My performance trajectory thus became more diverse, especially after being introduced to choreographer D’Cruz’s style of dance, which involved non dance-trained performers and untrained performers alike for her choreographies. My interest in dance, specifically experimental choreographies based on traditional forms, persisted.

I was particularly attracted to issues concerning the modernisation of traditional forms, and in how young dancers and choreographers incorporated their classical training by working gesture and movement, or via a particular traditional choreographic philosophy. I was also interested in how these new expressions were situated and identified culturally and politically in a fast modernising and urbanising Malaysia, especially in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The urbane and fast-growing city of the 1990s was espousing a modernity consisting of economic and infrastructural development that seemed – and still does – at odds with local traditions and cultural practices. One response was to modernise local traditional and cultural forms to reflect a modern city and country in order to retain a unique cultural identity distinct from Malaysia’s neighbours. This will be discussed and analysed in Chapter 1.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on Krishen Jit’s theatre and Malaysia’s Five Arts Centre, see ‘The Theatre of Krishen Jit: The Politics of Staging Difference in Multicultural Malaysia’ by Charlene Rajendran and C. J. Wee Wan-ling (2007).

On a final note, my geographical location of where I am a researcher also informs the position of my research. As a postgraduate research scholar with the National University of Singapore (NUS), I enjoy institutional academic rigour and support that have, hopefully, equipped me with the necessary critical tools and frames in the undertaking of my research thus far. This is in no small part due to the city-state's drive towards a modern hub that underscores aggressive growth in its knowledge economy sector. As a result, Singapore also builds a name for itself as a regional site of knowledge production enjoying, not in the least, its central geographical location in relation to the rest of Asia or Southeast Asia. This site includes research-intensive universities, such as Nanyang Technological University and NUS for instance, where high-level academic research into regional cultural practices are conducted across different disciplines. The rich sources of primary and secondary research material and information that circulate to and within such a regional knowledge site have enabled the growth and progression of this thesis.

### **Thesis Organisation**

This thesis is organised into four 'core' chapters, with two contextualising 'bookend' chapters. The four 'core' chapters examine in detail different choreographic elements that occur in the works of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers. The conditions in which their choreographic modernities arise and operate are distinct in each chapter. One of the central arguments here is to locate these choreographic modernities as the result of transformations in the dancers' classical vocabulary and practice. More importantly, each chapter highlights the ways particular aspects of the artists' own classical conventions produce these different sorts of choreographic modernities, understood as effects and influences on the creation of new dance works. Each chapter will also examine and analyse the influence of relevant "external" modernising forces.

Returning to the concept of "alternative modernities", I invoke Gaonkar's "culture-specific and site-based reading" of discrete modernities for the 'bookend' chapters which will – as the term implies – provide comparative contextualised

readings of modernities in national and cultural contexts other than those of Cambodia and Thailand. The two contextual chapters are born out of a personal performance history as well as experience of practising dance dramaturgy in Malaysia and Singapore. Performing and learning with Theatreworks Singapore – and later working with local choreographers as a dramaturg – has critically informed my experiences in assessing how dance is presently created and performed in a country with a distinctive manifestation of modernity, along with its sociocultural and political effects on the arts. On the other hand, my later experiences with Malaysian Five Arts Centre – along with encounters in everyday life – have also led me to examine the relationship between my home country’s brand of modernity and dance within a sociocultural and political historical context in which experimentation with classical choreographies initially surfaced in the 1980s.

Chapter 1 examines the choreographies of Malaysians Azanin Ahmad and Marion D’Cruz in their separate efforts in dance experimentations through different periods. Azanin Ahmad made a name for herself in the 1980s with her modern dance dramas while Marion D’Cruz established herself as a choreographer specialising in employing non-trained performances in her political dances in the 1990s to the present 2010s. Firstly, I argue that Azanin’s dance innovations were closely linked to the country’s emergent modes of modernisation. Malaysia’s modernity in the 1980s stressed dominant Malay cultural practices, and Azanin’s innovations in classical Malay art forms enabled her to gain visibility and popularity by complementing particular state socio-economic policies and cultural politics at that time. Azanin’s choreographic modernities, I argue, became especially apparent through the medium of television. I also examine the relationship between her dances on local television programming and the implications of a young modernising nation using this very modern technology of efficient electronic mass media as a national unifying tool. Subsequently I examine the works of D’Cruz who, in the 1990s to the 2010s, developed a dance vocabulary that enabled her to address sociocultural and political concerns through the use of everyday gestures and movements. D’Cruz’s choreographic modernities, I argue, result in political performances that challenge



essentialising social and cultural policies of the state, which are constantly changing in the name of nation building.

Chapter 2 looks at an alternative means of recognising how contemporary or experimental dances can be created, stemming directly from the parameters established by classical practices. Instead of introducing external factors acting on classical elements such as movements and gestures or music, Klunchun and the Amrita dancers can turn to their traditional skills and expertise in innovating their classical forms. This chapter proposes the internal mechanisms of the classical rhythm as a potential feature of a choreographic modernity in its productive and creative possibilities for experimental dance. Particular work processes and scenes in Amrita's *Khmeropedies I & II* (2010) and Klunchun's *Black and White* (2011) are discussed and analysed to illustrate how different kinds of transformations and experimentations act on a familiar rhythm. This in turn allows for generative transformation and expansion of the classical vocabulary. In *Khmeropedies I & II*, the Amrita dancers' variations in verbally keeping time with their familiar and perceived fixed classical Cambodian rhythm assisted in developing the classical vocabulary beyond the prescribed system of movements and gestures.

Additionally, Klunchun's movement workshops distorting the familiar Khon rhythm by adding and speeding up other rhythms enabled his company dancers to create individually distinctive movements and gestures. These illustrations demonstrate the creative potential within the dancers' own familiar spheres of traditional conventions, that are already present in their training and bodies. This chapter also argues that Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are empowered to certain degrees based on their intrinsic artistic qualities and skills to overturn the hegemonic aspects of their classical conventions. This in turn allows the generation of choreography and dance vocabulary that is new and contemporaneous to present artistic contexts yet stems from, and is anchored in, old and more familiar artistic practices.

Chapters 3 and 4 share a focus on classical gestures and characterisation as strategic means to develop new ideas about identity in performance and in the lived realities of the dancers. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of a specific Khon gesture which Klunchun deployed in *Nijinsky Siam* (2010), a historical excavation of Nijinsky's fascination with the classical Thai form a century before. A certain kind of historical and geographical mobility is suggested for Khon by tracing its 'travels' from a performance in St. Petersburg in 1910, to the present day usage by Klunchun and his dancers. The chapter also argues that the mobility of the classical gestures and movements is also present, and happens within a single performing body. In this particular instance, the path or route of the 'travelling' movements and gestures transforms them with different usages and meanings or situates them in new performance contexts, or even a combination of both factors.

Klunchun's use of the Khon *jeeb* hand gesture is closely traced in its trajectory from classical contexts to more experimental dances. I argue that the transformation of meanings and uses of the *jeeb* in Klunchun's *Nijinsky Siam* becomes an instance of choreographic modernity that reveals an emergent sense of self-identity. This chapter then brings to light the themes of autobiography and artistic self-identification in a series of works of by Klunchun, including *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2006), *I Am Demon* (2006), *About Khon* (2007) and *Nijinsky Siam* (2010). The emergent self-identity in the choreographer's works signals a departure from the performance and communal conventions of traditional Khon practices. The individual artist with creative independence experiments with fixed traditional practices to produce new performances that are distinct and singular. Klunchun's self-identity narrative is then cross-referenced with the performance history of classical Cambodian dancer Phon Sopheap, who has built his artistic career on mastering the monkey role in the Ramayana. There are similarities with Klunchun in the ways that Phon's experiments with monkey characterisation have given rise to questions about the self-identity of the artist and the individual. However, closer scrutiny between Klunchun's and Phon's artistic careers also reveals subtle differences. This chapter then posits that experimentation with specific gestures and

characterisation gives rise to different choreographic modernities of the self and the individual under different socio-cultural contexts.

Chapter 4 then turns to a broader perspective on identity, that of the performing collective or ensemble. It focuses on classical collective characterisations and ensemble choreography and the kinds of transformations they undergo in experimental performances. The example of Amrita's *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* (2013) is highlighted, in which the all-male dancers, used to performing the classical repertoire, changed how they functioned as a collective. The specific ways in which the performing collective is reconfigured reveals another choreographic modernity for these dancers.

As a counter-comparison, this chapter also discusses the less successful emergence of a new ensemble in performance in a segment of Klunchun's *Black and White*. As the choreographer endeavoured to develop the Khon vocabulary by expanding how an ensemble moves together, it became apparent that some aspects were working better than others. I suggest some of the reasons behind this.

Chapter 5 considers the broader ramifications of globalisation and its associated technologies on the classical vocabulary, the performing body and the artistic career trajectory. It highlights the kinds of creative responses of the Amrita dancers in their encounters with globalisation and other modern material, social, cultural and political demands on their physical and artistic selves. First, it introduces the features of touring performances and travelling as a substantial part of the Amrita dancers' artistic careers. In experimenting with their classical forms, the dancers travel widely. They frequently experience disruptions to their familiar biorhythms as well as classical dance rhythms. I argue that the Amrita dancers possess diverse coping strategies for these kinds of disruptions on- and off-stage. Their performance of *Crack* (2011), choreographed by Arco Renz, will be analysed as an example of how rhythmic disruptions and movements obstructions were remediated positively to create productive new forms of dance vocabulary.

This chapter also looks at the making of modern dance bodies by examining the cultural and performance histories of the Amrita dancers in their home country. I argue that in the name of modernity, the body is subjected to varying degrees of violence as it is moulded and reshaped through time according to sociocultural and political practices by changing artistic communities, social institutions, and political regimes. As artists, the Amrita dancers are confronted by the uncertainties of living in a “late” modern capitalist and neoliberal environment within their own home country and outside in all manners of foreign situations. On the other hand I propose that the dancers are not passive receivers of their artistic fate. Instead, I demonstrate that they benefit from global flows of arts networks, foreign funding, international public audience and artistic interests that inevitably support and contribute to Amrita’s efforts to create choreographies beyond their classical conventions.

Finally, Chapter 6 acts as the closing ‘bookend’ chapter by examining the city-state of Singapore as a regional cultural hub with flourishing institutional arts events and venues such as the Singapore Arts Festivals and Esplanade Theatres by the Bay. This has implications for widely travelled artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers who have gained artistically as well as economically from the city-state in the form of artistic commissions. Singapore’s history in developing arts and culture began in the 1980s with aggressive cultural policies that promoted – and continues to do so – the growth of the city-state into a “Global City of the Arts”. In its efforts of channelling economic capital into developing arts and culture, I argue that Singapore not only acts a cultural broker in its global capacities but that its competence in arts networking mobilises and ‘choreographs’ the flows and motion of economic and cultural capital, which foreign artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are beneficiaries.

This thesis will argue that choreographic modernities are born from the dancers and choreographers as a result of their encounters with different modernising and modern elements. What is important here is the point of origin for these choreographic modernities, which are to be found in the dancers’ training and

background. From rhythms and narratives to movement phrases and gestures, Klunchun, the Amrita dancers, and others, adapt and experiment with their classical expertise and virtuosity in changing times to challenge the notions of the old and traditional as fixed and rigid. Additionally, these dancers demonstrate certain reflexivities in how they wield classical forms and choreographies for modern audiences.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**MALAYSIA:**  
**Choreographic Modernities Past And Present**

**Introduction**

This contextualising chapter establishes a personal location for, and position on, my research into the relationship between dance and modernity. By ‘location’ I mean my birth country of Malaysia, and by ‘position’ I refer to the performance experiences that led me to scholarly research on dance. Growing up in a multiracial and multicultural country made up of Malay, Chinese, Indian and minority ethnicities, meant experiencing a mix of cultural and artistic practices. While I encountered a multitude of traditional and folk forms in public and school performances as a youth in the 1980s, my early performance memories are dominated by Malay cultural forms such as the shadow puppetry of Wayang Kulit, the folk choral musical form of Dikir Barat, the musical theatre of Boria, and Gamelan music. One particularly vivid memory is of watching a dance drama on television that turned out to be Azanin Ahmad’s *Jentayu* in 1981. It told of the adventures of a mythical phoenix-like bird named Jentayu and its battles with its evil counterpart Geroda, another magical bird.

What I remember of *Jentayu* at that time is the hand gestures of the female performers, with their flexed hands, accented by the subtle fluttering or flickering (*lentik* in Malay) of individual fingers. In years to come I would recognise this particular gesture as a common hand aesthetic in classical Malay dance, present in various ways in the court dances of Terinai, Tarian Asyik, and Joget Gamelan. In fact, this hand gesture is also found in the leather Wayang Kulit puppets, especially in the “human” characters of Rama and Siti Dewi (Sita), the hero and heroine in the Ramayana myths. The fluid, swaying hyper-extended arms and the articulated shoulders of the television performers also referenced Malay dance aesthetics. The music that accompanied the dance of the magical bird *Jentayu* – played by Azanin<sup>8</sup> –

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<sup>8</sup> I refer to Azanin Ahmad as ‘Azanin’, even though academic conventions dictate the use of the family name or surname in referring to persons. In Malay culture, there is the common practice of

in the celestial skies was reminiscent of similar melodies and rhythms of Wayang Kulit, from the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan. Recently re-viewing *Jentayu*, my fragmented recollections of Azanin's performances turned out to be quite accurate. What is significant about my lasting impression of Azanin's *Jentayu* was that I experienced the performance through television. What more, that a televised dance performance would reside in the recesses of my memory as an initial 'theatrical' experience, and that it would spark my interests in theatre and dance.

In 1997, I participated in a dance performance in Kuala Lumpur called *Immigrant in Bangsar*, choreographed by Marion D'Cruz.<sup>9</sup> It took place in the foyer of a shopping centre that catered to affluent customers. It shed light on the lives of immigrant workers in Malaysia, specifically drawing attention to the seemingly inconspicuous Bangladeshi manual labourers who keep places like expensive retail shops areas clean and looking upmarket. The performance featured about 30 performers who moved in different ways in response to a piece of poetry about the plight of refugees and immigrants in foreign lands, which was read through a loud hailer by D'Cruz. Throughout the performance the *Immigrant* performers ran, walked, jumped, rocked their bodies back and forth in standing positions, and even carried each other across the foyer. Sometimes the runs and jumps would be highly frenetic and sometimes the movement would be in slow motion, but we would all react to D'Cruz's poetry recitation in one way or another. We also vocalised all sorts of sounds from gentle whispers to shouts, to screams. The performance disrupted the calm environment of the elegant shopping centre, and a different kind of social and cultural rhythm and physicality invaded the space, which were at odds with the higher socioeconomic strata associated with the location.

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referring to a person by her given name. The Malay community does not use family names or surnames. The second name is a patronym. Azanin's second name refers to her father, Ahmad.

<sup>9</sup> After spending six years in Singapore I returned to Malaysia in 1996. Ong Keng Sen, whom I had performed for, recommended that I continued being involved in theatre with Kuala Lumpur's Five Arts Centre where D'Cruz was one of the founding members. Between 1997 and 2002, I performed in several productions of Five Arts Centre with either D'Cruz or theatre director, the late Krishen Jit.

Before *Immigrant in Bangsar*, I did not know much about Marion D’Cruz, except that she was already an established contemporary choreographer in Malaysia and that her forte was choreographing performers who had no training or background in dance. Gradually, I became interested in her methods of working with performers without dance training, as well as the political issues and themes she addressed in her dances. One of the first things that struck me was that D’Cruz was formally trained in classical Malay dance, namely Joget Gamelan and Terinai in the 1970s. Yet she would make a name for herself from the 1990s as a choreographer who worked chiefly with non-trained performers. After a year-long stint in New York in 1980 training in modern and contemporary body techniques such as the Graham and Cunningham styles of dance, D’Cruz returned to Malaysia and began experimenting with contemporary dance that had a Malaysian identity. D’Cruz’s early experimentations in the mid 1980s mixed Malay classical dance vocabulary with the modern techniques she had learned in New York.

Both born in the 1950s, Azanin and D’Cruz may have begun their early dance experiences in classical Malay forms, but, from their first public performances in Malaysia, their styles of dance would diverge greatly. Azanin experienced her initial artistic success in the country with *Jentayu* on stage in 1980, followed by the televised version in 1981, while D’Cruz was in New York encountering new dance techniques. By the mid 1980s, Azanin had carved a name for herself on the basis of her Malay dance dramas while D’Cruz was experimenting with local Malay forms to create her style of Malaysian contemporary dance. This chapter examines the differing dance practices of Azanin Ahmad and Marion D’Cruz, which resulted in equally divergent choreographic modernities for the choreographers. Their dance experimentations, I argue, are implicated in sociocultural and socio-political movements and developments over a number of periods of development in Malaysia. These different periods, between the 1980s and the 1990s for Azanin and, the 1990s through to 2012 for D’Cruz, are marked by differing nation-building rhetorics. I argue that Azanin’s choreographic modernities were the consequence of state-sanctioned cultural policies in the 1980s, while D’Cruz’s choreographic modernities responded to and transgressed the nation’s sociocultural and



socioeconomic politics in the 2000s. In chronological order, I begin my examination with a discussion of Azanin Ahmad and analyse her dance dramas, followed by Marion D’Cruz and her contemporary performances.

### **Azanin Ahmad and The Malay Dance Drama**

In 2010 I had the opportunity to visit Azanin Ahmad’s Suasana Cultural Centre, where her dance company is based. The centre is located in a tract of land 20km from the city centre of capital Kuala Lumpur. The centre boasts a sprawling heliconia and fruit garden surrounding an open-air dance studio where Azanin teaches traditional Malay dances to teenage students. During my visit, I was reacquainted with her stage and televised performances through the choreographer’s archives.

Azanin was considered to have “mined narrative wealth” by reintroducing sidelined Malay legends and folktales (Jit [1984] 2003b, 203) in her dance dramas between 1978 and 1996. It set her apart from the generation of budding choreographers during the 1980s. Malaysian dance and its various experimentations at that time consisted largely of local choreographers developing new forms and movements rather than concentrating on narratives or storytelling in their performances. Other local choreographers such as Marion D’Cruz, Mohammed Ghouse Nassarudin and Ramli Ibrahim concentrated on formalistic strategies of contemporising traditional Malay dance vocabulary with modern and postmodern dance techniques that they had learned from the West (Jit [1984] 2003a, 196-202). On the other hand, traditional and folk Malay dance exponents preferred to develop traditional and folk forms such as Zapin, Inang and Joget<sup>10</sup> into “new representations” (Md Nor 2003, 10) that were considered variations and modernisations or ‘updates’ of the original dance forms in terms of floor patterns and movement phrases.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about the respective Malay folk and traditional dance forms, see Mohd Anis Md Nor’s ‘Blurring Images, Glowing Likenesses: Old and New Styles in Traditional Dances of Malaysia’ (2001).

Azanin experimented with different Malay dance movements and gestures for her productions. She blended classical and folk forms. She also utilised other genres of in her productions, including Wayang Kulit music. This was most evident in her *Sri Rama-Siti Dewi* (1988) from the Ramayana narrative, which highlights the adventures of the hero Rama and his wife Siti Dewi (played by Azanin). Azanin choreographed movements for her dancers in *Sri Rama-Siti Dewi* that were based on the flat, two-dimensional profiles of the leather puppets. The performance was accompanied by live song and music from an ensemble of Wayang Kulit musicians, complete with a *dalang* (narrator and main puppeteer in Wayang Kulit) who narrated the actions on stage in song.

Azanin's dance company Suasana (established 1979) focused on producing and developing dance dramas devoted to Malay legends and myths. In 1978 she made her dance drama debut with *Dayang Sari*, which told the story of a doomed romance between a heavenly princess and a mortal prince. Then there was the story of the mythical bird *Jentayu* (1980) taken from the Kedah epic of *Merong Mahawangsa*; the love story of legendary Kelantan queen *Putri Sa'dong* (1982); the tragedy of princess *Cempaka Emas* (1984) from the northern state of Kelantan; *Seri Rama-Siti Dewi* (1988) from the Ramayana epic; the story of the mythical princess of Ledang Mountain (located in the southern state of Johor) in *Kunang-kunang Gunung Ledang* (1991); the legend 16<sup>th</sup>-century Malaccan woman warrior *Tun Fatimah* (1996), and finally the story of the fall of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Malaccan sultanate in *Keris* (1992). There was also a feminist bent to her works, as evidenced by the female protagonists in her dance dramas. Reviewer Krishen Jit claimed that one of Suasana's "vital signs of its modern sensibility" was the company's "feminist stance" in the staging of Malay myths and legends ([1984] 2003b, 203). *Dayang Sari*, *Putri Sa'dong*, *Tun Fatimah*, *Cempaka Emas* and *Kunang-kunang Gunung Ledang* are familiar Malay stories, but Azanin highlighted the female characters. Even her mythical bird, *Jentayu*, is feminised.

A further example of this sensibility can be found in Azanin's *Tun Fatimah*, which tells the story of the last female warrior in the Malaccan Sultanate during the

16<sup>th</sup> Century. Featuring in the Malay literary work *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*, believed to have been written in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in classical Malay Language, the character of Tun Fatimah only appears briefly in the book at the end of the Sultanate. *The Malay Annals* attributes the fall of the Malaccan Sultanate to Tun Fatimah, who was married to Sultan Mahmud Shah, the last Sultan. In her online article, 'The Question of Succession: The Role of Women in Traditional Malay Court Politics', Ruzy Suliza Hashim writes that the Sultan was so charmed by Tun Fatimah's beauty, he murdered her father, brother and husband to secure her hand in marriage (1996). In Azanin's version of the performance, Tun Fatimah endures the marriage to the Sultan to become the successor to the throne, and her progeny continues the line of the Malay Sultans. Azanin's Sultan Mahmud is portrayed as a debauched and despotic ruler who would indulge his whims and fancies. Azanin's Tun Fatimah remains a pillar of female virtue and propriety, suffering in silence over the deaths of her family members while staying by the Sultan's side through his follies. She is thus rewarded with descendants who would rebuild the glory of the Malay Sultanate.

### **Choreographic Modernity #1: Innovating the Classical**

Azanin's choreographies are composites of Malay traditional and classical dance gestures and movements. There are hints of Wayang Kulit hand gestures, Mak Yong amble and gait, Malay martial arts Silat stances, and Tari Inai finger positions in her dance compositions. The use of group formations from dances like Tari Asyik and Mak Yong are apparent in Azanin's *Dayang Sari*, *Jentayu*, *Putri Sa'dong* and *Seri Rama Siti Dewi*. Some elements are obviously grafted onto the performances, such as an entire accompanying Wayang Kulit musical troupe, performing recognisable phrases of rhythms and melodies in typical Wayang scenes in her *Seri Rama-Siti Dewi*. Azanin also utilised the Mak Yong music and vocal ensemble to narrate background stories for her *Cempaka Emas*, *Putri Sa'dong* and *Kunang-kunang Gunung Ledang*.

While viewing the recording of *Putri Sa'dong* in the Suasana Cultural Centre, Azanin recounts to me how she wanted to create theatrical dramas through dance

and movement. “[At that time] there was no such concept. What they had was *taridra* [Malay composite word for ‘dance drama,’ or *tari drama*]”. She says that *taridra* consisted of character interactions on stage that were mimed rather than physically articulated in codified gestures. “I did not want my characters to mime their ‘conversations’ to each other, I wanted them to dance out their roles and also their stories.” She started to examine dance vocabularies from Malay court and folk forms. “I used all the classical forms, like Mak Yong, Tari Asyik, Joget Gamelan, Tari Inai and Silat for fight scenes. I touched on all aspects of these dances and then found ways to make them my own for my dance dramas. I do not copy and paste.”

When considered in their entirety, the mix of movements and gestures in each of Azanin’s performances were choreographed or organised in a seamless manner. Each performance not only exhibited cohesive physical movements, gestures and aesthetics that narrativise the drama, but choices in musical accompaniment, costume and set design also contributed to creating a cohesive and integrated dance performance. For instance, Azanin employed the Kelantan-based Mak Yong song and music ensemble as music accompaniment in the story of the legendary Kelantan princess *Putri Sa’dong*. The Mak Yong musicians are versatile in playing music from the Mak Yong as well as Wayang Kulit repertoire. *Putri Sa’dong* begins with Mak Yong song and music, which serves as a prologue, while later scenes are accompanied by Wayang Kulit musical compositions. There is also effective employment of the Mak Yong female vocalist in the prologue, where she sings the introduction of *Putri Sa’dong* in Mak Yong melody and rhythm. After the prologue, the characters of the princess and the male consort make their entrance on stage, and this is accompanied by Wayang Kulit musical phrases that are originally used in the shadow puppetry scenes depicting the walk of hero Rama, named *Lagu Seri Rama Berjalan* (Malay: ‘Song accompanying Seri Rama Walking’).

In terms of physical vocabulary, many classical Malay dances exhibit similar forms – from outstretched palm and flexed fingers to raised and squared shoulders, to figure-of-eight hip movements, to list a few examples. The transitions between one dance form and another in Azanin’s performances are ‘smoothened’ by these

similarities. For instance, Azanin's solo at the beginning of *Putri Sa'dong* consists of a mix of movements and gestures from Tari Asyik and Tari Inai, while the subsequent group dance by her character's courtesans comprise of movements from Mak Yong and Joget Gamelan. Their arm and hand gestures look similar for these four dance styles, save for subtle details. Nevertheless, the apparent difference lies between the upright position of Azanin's princess walking in Tari Asyik style and her courtesans' kneeling positions in conventions of the Mak Yong and Joget Gamelan. Malay martial arts Silat stances and movements are also strategically utilised for the male characters and the fight scenes. What is also interesting in *Putri Sa'dong* is Azanin's choreography of a fight dance between Malay and Thai warriors in a scene where the Malay princess's army does battle with the neighbouring Thai kingdom. Azanin incorporated movements and stances from the Thai boxing form Muay Thai for the Thai warriors, as opposed to the Silat form for the Malay soldiers. There is indeed careful consideration in how different forms of Malay and other traditional dance vocabulary including musical repertoire is employed, arranged and blended in the entire performance.

Whereas Md Nor has suggested that other Malay choreographers of that time aimed to "arrange new dance motifs" for the traditional Joget, Inang, Asli and Inang (2003, 10), or make new creations based on indigenous dances such the Iban or Dayak (2003, 12), Azanin's works were not straightforward reconstructions of traditional dances. Nor did they mirror the early intercultural dance efforts of the 1970s and 1980s exemplified by local choreographers Mohammed Ghouse Nasaruddin, Lee Lee Lan, Wong Fook Chon and Ramli Ibrahim. These choreographers mixed Western ballet with Malay court dance, Indian classical Bharatanatyam and Odissi, Chinese martial arts or Chinese folk dance forms (Backer 2003, 66-67; Mew 2003, 50-51). In terms of narrative content, these choreographers dealt with issues and themes that were contemporaneous to their times. Ghouse explored the contemporary Malay identity (Backer 2003, 66, Jit [1984] 2003a, 198), Lee was concerned with finding a local contemporary form by mixing ballet with local issues affecting the urban Malaysian (Mew 2003, 49), Ramli examined 'characters or subjects from a psychoanalysis point of view' through 'cross-cultural' dance

performances (Backer 2003, 67), and, Wong focused on issues of social class in the Chinese community (Mew 2003, 50).

Azanin's unique tact in revisiting traditional practices and cultural elements suggests a certain mode of 'inventing tradition' (Hobsbawm 1983). Looking to traditional Malay dance forms to tell old Malay tales with "novel" staging techniques, Azanin's dance dramas can be considered as "novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations" (Hobsbawm 1983, 2). In relating the concept of the invented tradition to Indian cultural performances, Rustom Bharucha argues that new creations of tradition are the machinations of the urban intelligentsia who are removed from traditional practices that are implied to be located in rural communities (1993, 192). As an upper-middle class 'KL-ite' with a Bachelors degree in Business and a Masters degree in Politics from Australian universities, Azanin could be termed an "urban intelligentsia" who champions the traditional. However, I argue that Azanin, who acquired her Tari Asyik, Inai, Joget Gamelan and Mak Yong practices directly from traditional masters, is not removed from the points of origins of her art forms at all. It is Azanin's embodied practices of the original dances that enabled her to innovate the traditional to produce new dance dramas, new cultural products that refer to older practices. Bharucha writes of traditional cultural practices located in villages, such as his account of the village of Amaur in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh in India (1993, 195). Most Malay – and Southeast Asian, for that matter – cultural forms are historically linked to the royal court and the upper echelons of the society, such as the tari Asyik, Tari Inai and Joget Gamelan. Learning these Malay court dances would only serve to strengthen Azanin's position as an artist belonging to the social elite. Nevertheless, Bharucha qualifies that the idea of invented tradition is focused on the creation of "new artefacts" (1993, 193), and Azanin's position as an artist is one who creates "new artefacts" from traditional sources.

Azanin's dance dramas not only demonstrated artistic rigour in her methods of choreographing traditional Malay dance, music and narratives, including lavish costumes and sets, but she was particular about modern theatre technology. All her

dance dramas were staged in Western proscenium venues, complete with modern lighting rigs, fly systems and a comprehensive sound system. This is in stark contrast to traditional presentations of Mak Yong, Tari Asyik and Joget Gamelan, which are usually performed on bare ground at the same level as the audience sitting all round the performance area, illuminated by bare electric bulbs (or even open flame torches). In urban Kuala Lumpur Azanin had to attract a different socio-economic stratum – the “urban intelligentsia” educated in modern Western ways and who appreciated a Western theatre-going culture. By innovating Malay dance and mediating it through modern theatre technologies of the proscenium and systematic light and sound design, Azanin was able to present traditional performances “in a modern way to a modern audience” (Jit 2003b [1984], 203).

### **Malay Modernity Through Cultural Transformations**

As a young nation, which had gained independence in 1957, the Malaysia of the 1980s was undergoing aggressive socioeconomic, cultural and political change. Under the new leadership of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad – who was in power from 1981 to 2003 – numerous economic policies were put into place, including the country’s shift from an agriculture-based economy to heavy, manufacturing and export industries, and the privatisation of government bodies, and the country experienced rapid economic growth (Cheah 2002, 189; Milne and Mauzy 1999, 56-64). There was also push for what Cheah Boon Kheng calls Mahathir’s “brand of Malaysian (à la Malay) nationalism” (2002, 207). He is in fact today still regarded by the general public as Malaysia’s Father of Modernisation (*Bapa Pemodenan*). Mahathir considered Malaysia in the 1970s backward; the fact that many ethnic Malay people lived in *kampungs* (Malay: villages) was faulted as a major hurdle to economic and social progress. He was critical of old Malay customs and traditions, which he viewed as holding back the community from entering the modern era (Kahn 2006, 110). According to Mahathir, Malay *kampung* values needed to be replaced by what Joel S. Kahn calls an “urban revolution”, more compatible with the making of a modern Malaysia (2006, 111).

Following the affirmative action of the New Economic Policy (NEP), established in 1971<sup>11</sup>, the Malay middle class began to grow into a new socio-economic phenomenon by 1980s. Known as *Melayu Baru* or the New Malay, this new Malay middle class saw a shift from an agricultural to an industrial population in the country's Malay community (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 62). The generation of *Melayu Baru*<sup>12</sup> was envisioned as urban, corporate in profession, entrepreneurial and highly educated, preferably with an overseas tertiary degree. (Shamsul 1999, 101-102). Mahathir added that the *Melayu Baru* are people "who possess a culture suited to the modern period, who are capable of meeting all challenges, able to compete without assistance, learned, knowledgeable, sophisticated, honest, disciplined, trustworthy and competent" (quoted in Shamsul 1999, 105).

As the New Economic Policy was being put into place, the country also launched its National Cultural Policy in 1972.<sup>13</sup> The federal government of that time delivered three principles that were supposed to guide the shaping of a national cultural identity. They were: i) the national culture would be based on indigenous Malay culture; ii) the Malay-based national culture would also include other cultural elements of the multiracial nation; and iii) Islam would become a vital consideration in shaping the national cultural identity. When the National Cultural Congress convened to determine its policies, numerous aspects of culture, from the history curriculum to pottery, architecture to dance, ethnic costumes to poetry were presented by cultural activists, artists, arts practitioners and academics (Asas 1973). Among them were the late Mubin Sheppard who was a cultural archivist, and Malay culture scholar Amin Sweeney, credited by Azanin as individuals who inspired her to

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<sup>11</sup> The New Economic Policy was put in place to address the economic imbalance between the Malay and Chinese communities at that time. It was the government's response to bloody racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese in the country in 1969, which was a culmination of the Malay community's discontent over their lack of economic wealth compared to the Chinese community. As stated by Milne and Mauzy, "the main thrust of the NEP was to increase the numbers of Malay managers and entrepreneurs" (1999, 52).

<sup>12</sup> Although the term *Melayu Baru* was not commonly used until the 90s, this socio-economic group already began to grow in the 80s as a result of the NEP in the 70s together with the changing economic policies put into action by Mahathir.

<sup>13</sup> As a result of the racial riots of 1969, the National Cultural Policy followed the New Economic Policy to foster national unity in the country's plural society. In the policy, recommendations on cultural elements such as language, literature, forms of theatre, song and dance, architecture and a host of other indigenous arts and crafts be used to create a national culture.



delve into the preservation and development of traditional and classical Malay performing arts (Mohamad 1999, 20). Azanin's web site *Suasana Cultural Centre* states that the choreographer's works are "based on ... the raw materials for a national cultural identity that already exist in abundance", ('Suasana' 2008) referring to the cache of Malay culture and art forms that echo the National Cultural Policy. Azanin's dance dramas would have been timely cultural products satisfying the cultural policy's call to promote Malay culture as basis for a national identity.

Writing on cultural politics in 1980s Malaysia, Joel S. Kahn observed a country "awash with the symbolism of 'traditional Malay culture' " (1992, 163). He elaborated that the growth of what he terms a "Malay cultural industry" highlighted how Malay culture was being constructed and modernised at that time. Kahn attributed this "Malay cultural industry" to the aim of the National Cultural Policy to build a national identity centred on Malay culture. He pinpointed the burgeoning urban and modern Malay middle class as a notable feature of this cultural project, arguing that Malay cultural industry was targeted at this segment to promote a return to Malay culture as a means to identifying with the ethnicity (1992, 164). In his brief examination of "aspects of contemporary Malaysia neo-traditionalism" (1992, 165), Kahn noted the proliferation of traditional Malay performances in early 1988, where Malay court dances and a dance drama depicting court life in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Kelantan were publicised in the national newspapers (1992, 167).

Azanin's dance dramas fit into the performance trends described by Kahn. Government support for Azanin's productions was substantial. Not only did her work contribute to the "Malay culture industry" in the country, they represented a unique cultural selling point for drawing in tourism from abroad. Her *Seri Rama-Siti Dewi* was part of the then Ministry of Culture and Tourism's Visit Malaysia Year promotions, presented in America in 1988 (*Keris* 1992). At the same time, corporate support reflected a push towards commercial and retail privatisation and corporatisation in Malaysia at the time. Local government-linked companies (GLCs) such as Sime Darby, Petronas, Bank Bumiputra and Malaysia Airlines were sponsors of Azanin's productions at the height of her artistic success. Corporate support by

these companies was in all probability sanctioned by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. From a critical artistic perspective, Azanin's dance dramas also toured international arts festivals extensively. Some of her full-fledged dance dramas toured abroad – *Jentayu* to Germany and England (1981), *Cempaka Emas* to Australia (1984) and Hong Kong (1985), *Seri Rama-Siti Dewi* to America (1988), Singapore (1990) and Japan (1990). Azanin also presented solo performances with excerpts of the dance dramas in Cambodia (1995), America (1998) and Italy (1999). She participated in WOMAD (World Music, Arts and Dance) festivals in Spain (1998), England (1999) and South Africa (2001). The choreographer and her performances thereby became symbols of Malay(sian) culture that enabled both the ministry and the GLCs to gain cultural and social capital locally and internationally.

Azanin's version of modern Malay cultural forms with progressive staging techniques and touring resume in the international arts circuit provided a suitable 'candidate' to the idea of a modern Malay cultural capital rooted in tradition. The idea of a New Malay woman embodied and representing culture fit into the patriarchal socio-politics of the state and Malay culture, where culture is engendered with female qualities of grace, beauty and refinement. On the other hand, her refocusing of the feminine stances in the legends and myths she staged suggested a modern worldview based on gender equality. This mediated the issue of the feudal and patriarchal nature of the Malay culture working against the more liberal and tolerant views adopted by a modern community (Kahn 1992, 165). Therefore Azanin as a modern Malay artist could be perceived as an ideal figure by the state for personifying a national cultural identity, while her dance dramas were model cultural products for this project.

### **Choreographic Modernity #2: The Tradition Will Be Televised**

Azanin's audience was further broadened with the advent of a mediated technology: broadcast television. The national broadcast of *Dayang Sari* (1979) sparked a series of televised performances that lasted over 15 years. Azanin is the only Malaysian choreographer who has achieved such a feat in the country. Seven of Azanin's dance dramas were broadcast by state-owned Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), and her

last production was aired by the country's first private cable network, Astro. Each new stage production was quickly followed by a television version.

Azanin's dances on television were not just recorded versions or documentation of her stage performances. She edited her two-hour stage performances to an hour to fit television programme formatting. Furthermore, Azanin faced the challenge of re-choreographing the work for the camera(s). Without any formal training in filmmaking, she was assisted by Shuhaimi Baba. A young film student at that time, Shuhaimi has since established herself as a prominent filmmaker in Malaysia, with over eight critically-acclaimed and award-winning feature-length works to her name. Shuhaimi worked on Azanin's television versions of *Dayang Sari* in 1979, *Jentayu* in 1981 and *Putri Sa'dong* in 1983. Today, she is acclaimed as a feminist filmmaker, who has portrayed different aspects of the modern Malay woman in her films including *Selubung*, *Ringgit Kassorga* and *Laya Lara* (Khoo 2006, 142-144), so it is no wonder that an artistic collaboration was struck up between Shuhaimi and an apparent feminist choreographer. At the filming of *Dayang Sari*, Azanin claims that she maintained artistic control and recounts how she checked all camera angles and close-ups while Shuhaimi attended to the finer technical points of cinematography work. Azanin also maintains that she was involved with the editing of the films.

According to Sherril Dodds, dance film or screen dance opens and develops "spatial possibilities" through the use of camera perspectives, enabling angles of viewing – close-ups, mid-shots, top-down, vertical, diagonal and 360-degree perspectives – that would not be available in a frontal stage performance (2001, 71). These spatial possibilities allow parts of a narrative to develop that may be more restricted on a fixed stage.

*Dayang Sari* was shot completely outdoors in the Genting Highlands and on the island of Langkawi (Figure 1.1). Scenic shots of the two locations set the mood for the performance, which tells the story of a celestial princess who falls in love with a mortal. The opening sequence of the dance establishes a wide shot of a lake

(which will later play an important role in the development of the story) and then cuts to a group of dancers in a different location. Many other locations suggesting multiple spatialities such as a hill slope, the interior of a cave and the surrounds of a waterfall are utilised to develop the story. The sequencing of different spaces progresses the narrative of *Dayang Sari*, while jump cuts from one place to another signify the passing of time in the plot.



**Figure 1.1: Screen capture of Azanin Ahmad (centre) in the televised version of *Dayang Sari* (1979) that was shot entirely at outdoor locations**

A mixture of wide shots, pans and close-ups are utilised to frame the dances in *Dayang Sari*. For instance, the opening sequence featuring the young dancers consists of several frames which goes from wide full-length body shots of the dancers to establish the overall aesthetics of the choreography, to mid-body shots of two dancers at a time to focus on the synchronised movements, to close-ups of details of the dancers' hand gestures and facial expressions. In addition, there are unconventional points of view, such as the camera tilting from bottom up, and the camera zooming in on the back of the dancers. With the camera, the dancing body can be framed in distinctive ways and the viewer can piece together an almost 360-degree perspective of the dancer and their movements (Dodds 2001, 73). These

different camera angles also meant that Azanin worked closely with the cinematographer for the multiple perspectives in her television dances. To that extent, Azanin also choreographed the camera in terms of movement and positioning in relation to her dancers.



**Figure 1.2: Screen capture of *Jentayu* (1981) with special effects in the background where Jentayu, played by Azanin Ahmad, flies through the heavens**

The screen version of *Jentayu* presented a different situation, where the entire performance was shot inside a studio with elaborate sets of palace grounds, a rocky landscape and the deck of an ancient ship to demarcate different scenes in the plot. There was also liberal use of special effects. *Jentayu* tells the story of the titular mythical bird who was sent to protect a Chinese princess betrothed to the Prince of the Land of Rum. The evil bird Geroda kidnaps the princess, leaving Jentayu to save her and return the princess to her betrothed. Special effects were used to portray scenes of Jentayu flying in the celestial heavens (Figure 1.2), and also in battles scenes between Jentayu and Geroda fighting in the skies. The dancing characters were superimposed on a background of the director's interpretation of the celestial skies, with twinkling coloured lights as stars. Special effects also feature when Jentayu casts her spell on the princess. Compared to today's special effects

technology, these scenes, which had to contend with early blue-screen technology, appear amateurish and even kitsch. Yet it was a technological achievement for Malaysian television programming as well as an artistic milestone for Azanin as a dance-on-screen choreographer. Based on the achievements of having eight dance dramas re-choreographed for the camera and television screen, I contend that Azanin was the first prolific Malaysian film dance artist who gave careful thought to choreographing for film and the screen.

In the book *Media, Culture and Society in Malaysia*, volume editor Yeoh Seng Guan states that “brutish control and monopoly of the mainstream media continues to be a lasting legacy of statecraft in Malaysia” (2010, 4). The political power of mass media as well as being a tool of sociocultural control “cannot be circumscribed but circulate[s] at every level and aspect of human society”. Thus he describes the Malaysian situation where:

the deployment of media and communicational technologies in the production, dissemination and consumption of information of all varieties constitute acts of governmental power developed in particular historical and cultural contexts.

(2010, 4)

Perceived in this political context, it is interesting to analyse the situation of Azanin and the proliferation of her televised dance dramas in the broader political and sociocultural history of the country at that particular time.

The advent of technology played a significant part in the government’s efforts to spread its message of a national cultural identity. Introduced in 1963, television in Malaysia soon became an important propaganda tool, and after the racial riots of 1969 various drama and educational television programmes were used to foster national unity by promoting the Malay Language (Bahasa Malaysia) as the national language (McDaniel 1994, 85-86). There was also a substantial amount of cultural programming during the 1980s. As described at the beginning of the chapter, growing up in front of the television at that time, I was exposed to many of these, ranging from *Silat* championships to *Dikir Barat* (Malay folk choir) competitions, short documentaries featuring local handicraft such the making of

*songket* (Malay brocade), *gasing* (Malay spinning tops), *wau* (Malay kite), *Wayang Kulit* leather puppets, wood carving and *tembikar* (Malay pottery). Invoking the Andersonian concept of imagined national communities ([1983] 1991, 37-46), the television has replaced the print medium of newspaper where the device becomes a necessary tool to spread modern nationalism by disseminating state-sanctioned cultural elements that constitute a national cultural identity. Azanin's dance dramas in effect became a modern Malay cultural imaginary via the television. They were conscripted by the larger nationalist project to portray a state-constructed national cultural identity.

The importance of the television as a modern, as well as, *modernising* tool by the Malaysian government in the 1980s is suggested by Azanin's television dances, marking not only technological milestones of national broadcast but also significant national events. The broadcast of Azanin's *Dayang Sari* in 1979 was to celebrate the national station's switch from black-and-white format to colour. Subsequently her *Putri Sa'dong* in 1982, which was shot on the then innovative video format, marked RTM's transition from recording on film to video. Her *Tun Fatimah* in 1996 heralded the advent of digital film with the entry of Malaysia's first private direct broadcast satellite pay television service, ASTRO. Then there were her television productions that were broadcast in conjunction with the country's festivals and special occasions. *Jentayu* was telecast in conjunction with Literary Day in 1981, *Putri Sa'dong* and *Kunang-kunang Gunung Ledang* were telecast during National Day celebrations (1983 and 1993), and *Keris* was telecast as part of the celebration of the King's birthday (1992). The television not only became a symbol of technological modernity for the state but the electronic device became a modernising tool in two aspects.

First, it was now possible to connect and unite Malaysian television viewers as a nation by communicating events and occasions of national significance. The imagined community at a national level is reinforced by the common link of a televised event happening simultaneously throughout the country. Second, this imagined national community is culturally identified or bound together through the broadcast of specific cultural forms watched by television viewers all over the

country, such as Azanin's modern Malay dance dramas, along with the other types of Malay cultural programmes mentioned earlier. One final point, attesting to the social and cultural influences of Azanin's televised dances, pertains to a particular news item. As reported in online newspaper *The Star* (Khoo, 2008), Azanin's televised *Putri Sa'dong* in 1983 was called an "election stopper" as "many chose to stay home and watch it rather than go out to vote in a by-election in Kelantan". As mentioned, the popular mythical figure of Putri Sa'dong (Malay: Princess Sa'dong) originates from the Malaysian north-eastern state of Kelantan.

Azanin's last fully-fledged dance drama was *Tun Fatimah* in 1996, which was then broadcast by private cable television network Astro. It was probably no coincidence that *Tun Fatimah* was broadcast by a private cable network, and that it was her final significant dance drama to date. By the late 1980s, the cultural and socio-political climate in Malaysia was facing yet another shift. Prime Minister Mahathir was not only aiming to promote Malay cultural identity in the creation of a modern Malaysia, but he also pushed for a more prominent role for Islam in the country. Cheah Boon Kheng notes that "introduction of the Islamic Centre, the Islamic Bank [established 1983], the International Islamic University [established 1983], and the Institute for Islamic Research [1993] brought Islam into the national mainstream" (2002, 213). By the mid 1980s, Quran readings were becoming increasingly common on television. Traditional and folk musical performances such as dikir barat<sup>14</sup>, dondang sayang<sup>15</sup> and joget dances were replaced by nasyid, Islamic choral singing, and Islamic-themed performances.<sup>16</sup> Quran recitation competitions were also beginning to be broadcast live. Elements of Malay folklore, magic and ghost stories were deemed to conflict with Islamic teachings. Classic black-and-white Malay horror films also slowly disappeared from state-run RTM's programming.<sup>17</sup> Azanin's narratives of magical beings and celestial figures would have been

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<sup>14</sup> A popular musical choral performance form where groups of 10 to 15 performers sing in verse and rhyme, usually in competition between two dikir barat groups.

<sup>15</sup> Folk love ballads popularised by the Straits Chinese (Peranakan) community in Malaysia, that has its influences from Portuguese folk music.

<sup>16</sup> My own recollection as a fervent television viewer in my teenage years.

<sup>17</sup> Film journalist Allan Koay writes about the disappearance of horror films in his article 'History of Malaysian Cinematic Horror' in *The Star* newspaper:  
<http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2005/8/5/movies/11073828&sec=movies>.



considered unsuitable and even undesirable under new Islamic guidelines and censorship board policies by the early 1990s.

When examined under the shifting lenses of national cultural and political policies, I contend that Azanin's success in her dance dramas and screen dances was bolstered by the advent of state-prescribed modernities. There is a case to be made that the choreographer's artistic development and then the decline in her visibility corresponded to gradual shift in cultural and religious policy, from the primacy of Malay culture as part of Mahathir's brand of modernisation in the early 1980s, to increasing Islamisation. There is no doubt that Azanin Ahmad stands on her own artistic merits with her innovations in modern Malay dance dramas and her pioneering dance films. Nevertheless, her continued success in that decade was ultimately reliant on state socio-economic and cultural policies that sanctioned one version of modernity at that time, but that was ultimately superseded by another.

### **Marion D'Cruz and Political Choreographies**

Considered Malaysia's contemporary dance doyenne, choreographer-educator-activist Marion D'Cruz creates works that have long been considered ground-breaking in their aesthetics and political content. Between 1981 and 2013, she created fifteen of her own short and long choreographies, while contributing to approximately twenty other performances as dancer or choreographer. D'Cruz's early choreographies in the mid 1980s focused on formalistic experimentations with local Malay dances such as the Malay court Terinai and Joget Gamelan. She was credited with possessing a "post-modern orientation" in her early dance works, where she concentrated on movement vocabulary. Her performance of *Braid* (1984) was cited as an example of synthesised Eastern and Western choreographies between Terinai and the Graham technique (Jit 2003 [1984], 201-202). As a child, D'Cruz received ballet training but went on to learn various local ethnic dance forms such as Bharata Natyam and Malay folk dances. D'Cruz continued her dance training and education in local dance forms at a formal tertiary setting, where she gained her Masters of Arts from University of Science Malaysia, researching Joget Gamelan in

contemporary practice. Her traditional dance experience also extends to classical Javanese Serimpi and Balinese mask dance.

By the 1990s, D’Cruz eschewed formal dance techniques in favour of improvisational work with performers who were not necessarily trained in dance. Initially she choreographed and worked with physical theatre performers. She would develop this further to choreograph non-trained performers favouring everyday movements. There was also constant change and development in D’Cruz’s narrative content. Her early works addressed gender issues like *Urn Piece* (1988) and *Swan Song* (1988), and historical violence in *Sook Ching* (1990), which told of the massacre of Chinese during the Japanese occupation in Malaysia (1941-1945). Her later works highlighted marginalised communities in the country such as the voiceless man in the street in *Let Me Speak* (1994), and the plight of migrant workers in different versions of *Immigrant* (1996 to 1998), including *Immigrant in Bangsar*. By the 2000s, D’Cruz had shifted her political commentaries to national issues like the empty exuberance of a nation’s patriotic call in *Malaysia Boleh!* (2001), violence and brutality in *War on Iraq* (2003), and a critique of the deteriorating state of the nation in *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* (2006).

### **Politicised Everyday Movements**

*Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* (English: Palm Blossoms, Hibiscus Blooms) touched on issues of race, politics, crime, money corruption and nationhood. D’Cruz worked with 22 mainly non-trained performers – along with a few trained performers – who came from different fields in the arts, media and other professions. The one-hour dance concert consisted of episodic scenes of contemporary Malaysian life. While some scenes in the performance related to the harsh realities of living in Malaysia such as rising crime rates and corruption, D’Cruz’s more successful choreographic compositions were choreographic transgressions of state-prescribed rhetoric on national representations of cultural, social and religious identities. There are two such scenes in *Bunga Manggar* that not only challenge but re-imagine dominant discourses on religion and identity within essentialised notions of multiculturalism.

In the first, shorter example, *Bunga Manggar* begins with the ensemble of dancers singing of the national anthem 'Negeraku' (English: My Country) in the customary, respectful, upright standing positions. Immediately after the song, the dancers slowly begin to "melt" as their bodies gently fall to the ground. The "melted" bodies then gradually come life but this time the dancers take on prayer or worship poses of different religions. The dancers move from one worship gesture into another – the prostrate Muslim worship that morphs into Taoist and Buddhist prayer gestures of joined palms, and then transforms further into Christian clasped hands.

In order to appreciate the significance of this sequence, some context is in order. Malaysia's second prime minister Abdullah Badawi, who led the country from 1993 to 2009, promoted the Islamic guiding principles of *Islam Hadhari* or Civilisational Islam to the Malay (Muslim) community in the country as means to prosperity and progress that is sanctioned by the religion.<sup>18</sup> While Muhammed Haniff Hassan writes in his online article that that the Malaysian prime minister at that time assured that the *Islam Hadhari* principles were solely recommendations for Malaysian Muslims to turn to as Islamic guides to personal and economic development rather than as "notions of an Islamic state" (2004, 1), the slippery definition of Malaysia being an "Islamic state" or "a secular state with Islam as an official religion" continues to be debated. In 2007, Prime Minister Abdullah was reported to have said that Malaysia "was an Islamic state and not a secular state" and that it was "an Islamic state ruled by Islamic principles, and at the same time, was also a country that believed in Federal Constitution" (Palaniappan 2007). The different terminologies of "official religion" and "Islamic state" naturally would cause concern among the non-Muslim community, some of whom fear that the right to the freedom of religion, as provided for in the Malaysian Constitution, may be at risk.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Present Prime Minister Mohamad Najib Abdul Razak who took over from Abdullah in 2004 has however never continued with the promotion of *Hadhari Islam*.

<sup>19</sup> The most recent religious controversy in the country also involved the Muslim community and officials where the word *Allah* (Arab for God) has been banned from Malay Language bibles because *Allah* is exclusive to the Islam faith. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia->

In earlier segments, I suggested that the rise of Islamisation in Malaysia in the 1990s<sup>20</sup> could suggest an explanation for Azanin's waning popularity with the state and its changing religious policies. D'Cruz on the other hand addresses the issue of Islam, nation and identity head on with her 'prayer dance' segment in *Bunga Manggar*. This particular scene recovers the physical practices of other religions and poses them as equally important in a plural nation-state, disrupting the generalised notion that all Malaysians are Muslims. In a context where an official religion has sometimes been re-read as state religion in a multicultural and multi-religious society, D'Cruz challenges what Homi K. Bhabha has described as the state's "totalizing boundaries", which are artificially constructed by "ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha 1990, 300).

D'Cruz's contestation of the state's identity essentialism in *Bunga Manggar* continues with the second and more substantial dance segment, called the "Cilayu" scene. There, D'Cruz employs simple acts of manoeuvring, shifting, placing and locating bodies to enact a contestation of state categorisations of race. Her performers dance on a table that becomes the geography of ethnic distribution.<sup>21</sup> As dancers move onto the table, taking sitting or standing positions, they verbally declare their official "race" ("Chinese" or "Malay" or "Indian" or even "Dan Lain-lain", the Malay term for "Other" an official category in government forms). Individual performers of the same ethnicity gravitate toward each other. Chinese performers sit on the front of the table while the Malays stand away from the Chinese. 'Others' – as in other minor ethnicities – are relegated to sitting under the table while, when the Indians arrive at the table, everyone moves away. The locations of the ethnic groups on the table begin to mirror the distribution of the country's ethnicities under the New Economic Policy (NEP). While this may be a

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<sup>20</sup> While Cheah suggested Islamisation initially took place in Malaysia the 1980s, the socio-political and socioeconomics effects were in all probability only fully realised and felt by the public from the 1990s onwards.

<sup>21</sup> The multiracial mix of Malaysia consists of Malay (50%), Chinese (25%) and Indian (7%) ethnicities alongside indigenous groups (such as Kadazan, Dayak, Iban, etc) and 'Eurasians'.

historical reproduction of the physical tensions and distances of ethnic communities in Malaysia, the sentiment and perception of the choreographed races remain prevalent.

Drafted in 1970, the NEP aimed to address economic disparities among ethnic groups of that time, namely by increasing the economic wealth of the Malays. The government of that time had recognised that, while the majority population of Malays held political power in the government, the Chinese community held a majority of the economic power in Malaysia. The Indians and other minority races, on the other hand, did not have either. A nationally constituted system was enforced in fields such as commerce and finance, higher education and housing, where the Malays were accorded special privileges such as an allotted number of seats on boards of directors in business, a fixed number of places for Malay students in universities, low interest rates for housing loans, and more. This system exists to the present day.



**Figure 1.3: The “Cilayu” scene from *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya*, where the dancer in brown shirt identifies himself as “Cilayu”, standing with two Malay dancers, even though he is Chinese. Note the dancer, lying under the table, who is considered “Lain-lain” or “Other”. Photo by Philip Craig**

D’Cruz’s neat ethnic distribution and division is disrupted when a performer, who is visibly Chinese, refuses to be part of the Chinese group even when he is cajoled to join them. He stands alone and declares himself “Cilayu,” a hybrid of *Cina* (Malay for Chinese) and *Melayu* (Malay) (Figure 1.3). This hybrid challenges the hegemony of “categorical oppositions”, of Malay versus Chinese, “to create the conditions for cultural reflexivity and change” (2000 Werbner, 1), where the boundaries of racial division are blurred. Another hybrid is then presented when a Malay performer refuses to join the Malay group, despite being encouraged and subsequently threatened into doing so. She instead gravitates toward the Chinese group. This again causes disruption when one ethnicity actually relates and identifies with another, challenging perceptions that the same ethnicity must band together.

As the scene progresses, dancers on the table start to rename themselves under minority ethnicities such as “Bidayuh”, “Bengali”, “Tamil”, “Siam”, “Bugis”, “Orang Asli”, “Nyonya” and “Orang Laut”, ethnic categories obfuscated under the “Others” category. By now, the table is also equally distributed with dancers mixing in their different ethnicities. Eventually, as the scene draws to an end, the dancers start to identify with Malaysian-made goods such as brand names (“Ajinomoto”, “Milo”, “Mopiko”), local food and drink (“santan”, “kuaci” “kopi kau-kau” “rojak”), socio-cultural attitudes (“On the way!”). In the end, D’Cruz’s performers break away from the visible markers of officially sanctioned race and ethnicity of Malaysians by constructing alternative Malaysian identities, a bricolage of other cultural elements, for instance food, social and cultural norms, colloquial expressions and local icons.

In a later lecture-demonstration, D’Cruz explained that the idea behind *Bunga Manggar* “was to create multiplicity – many stories, many bodies, many ideas, many minds, many Malaysias” (Gostan Forward 2012). Her idea of “many stories, many bodies, many ideas, many minds” germinated in the 1990s when D’Cruz began to work with non-trained dancers to produce different kinds of movement vocabulary and even further back in the 1980s when the choreographer worked with theatre performers to perform movement pieces. For her, “non-trained performers, if they are strong and flexible and creative and ‘mad’, are freer with

their bodies” (Gostan 2012, 4). She additionally states, “There is dance in everyone” (D’Cruz 2003, 78) and there are also politics in every body. Since the 1990s, D’Cruz has successfully created a dance vocabulary through the use of everyday movements based on her non-trained performers’ *habitus* of their social, cultural and physical environments (Bourdieu 1977). This is D’Cruz’s choreographic modernity: her ability to organise these everyday movements, “bodily hexis” or embodied expressions of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 93-94), into political choreographies.

### **Choreographed Contestations**

While the primacy of Malay culture persisted in the state’s national identity rhetoric in the 1990s, there was a new push for a multicultural Malaysia that was commodified for the foreign tourist market. The Malaysian Tourism Board began marketing the country as “Malaysia Truly Asia” in the early 1990s to present Malaysia as possessing the efficiency and progress of modernity alongside the quaint charms of tradition. Today, its website describes a country where “[t]owering skyscrapers look down upon wooden houses built on stilts while five-star hotels sit just metres away from ancient reefs” (‘About Malaysia’ 2013). Asian diversity is also promoted with the main mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures to be enjoyed in one place. In trying to promote what is ‘truly Asian’, multiethnic Malaysian society is essentialised into fixed ethnic identities of Malay, Chinese or Indian. Interstitial and hybrid cultures are ignored for the sake of neat categorisations in ‘selling’ a Malaysian multiculturalism that happily straddles the traditional and the modern.

At the same time, Prime Minister Mahathir began, within the nation, to promote the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (English: Malaysian Race). He defines this term as,

... people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia (the Malaysian Language: Malay) and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal of Bangsa Malaysia, the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion.

(quoted in Loh 2002, 33)

The term is problematic as the word *bangsa* can mean “race” and “nationality”, hence *Bangsa Malaysia* obfuscates race and nationality to erase ethnic categorization. As mentioned earlier, if modern Malaysia was to be imagined and built on Malay culture with Malay language, with a constitution that privileges the Malay community, then to be *Bangsa Malaysia* is to be *Bangsa Melayu*. However, parliamentary debates on the term had concluded with Malaysian ministers stressing that *Bangsa Malaysia* “merely reflects the spirit of a Malaysian and it should be looked at from a broad perspective” instead of “the formation of a new race” as reported by online news site *The Star* (‘Soul of a Nation’ 2006).

D’Cruz’s “Cilayu” in *Bunga Manggar* firstly ameliorates the problems of essentialised notions of ‘neat’ multiculturalism with unified and fixed ethnic identities, and secondly, reimagines a pluralist multicultural Malaysia, a *Bangsa Malaysia* that is always in a state of transformation and flux. She overturns neat as well as vague state categorisations of Malay, Chinese, Indian and “Others” by allowing for the country’s “counter narratives” to be voiced in the “margins of the modern nation” (Bhabha 1990, 291-297). D’Cruz then not only reimagines a *Bangsa Malaysia* but embodies its “spirit” through formations of new identities that are constantly evolving and changing, from terms of ethnicities to Malaysian brand names, to colloquial references that are deemed uniquely Malaysian. Randy Martin proposes that dancing bodies present “a sense of possibility as to where motion can lead us, that amounts to a material amalgamation of thinking and doing as world-making activity” (1998, 48). “Cilayu” materialises the very possibility of an alternate modern national identity that elides essentialised and hegemonic categorisations of ethnicity and race.

### **Remembrance, Dance, Modernity**

In 2009, D’Cruz presented a solo lecture performance entitled *Gostan Forward*. The choreographer regaled the audience with anecdotes and experiences from her 30-year dance career (Figure 1.4). D’Cruz also re-enacted segments of her past dance performances. The performance was also peppered with details of the country’s significant sociocultural and political history, which paralleled the artistic events and experiences of D’Cruz’s personal performance history. Significantly,



*Gostan Forward* tells the story of a dancer's journey of different dance forms. It charts D'Cruz's early classical Western (ballet) and local (Malay) experiences as a young dancer in her home country to her exposure to post-modern and contemporary dance training in her 30s when she was in New York from 1980 to 1981.



**Figure 1.4: D'Cruz (seated on table) in a scene in *Gostan Forward* where she recounts her creation process of *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya*. The table was the same one used in *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* for the "Cilayu" scene. Photo by James Lee**

Her encounters with various dance forms in different times and spaces suggest distinct experiences of modernity through her art form. For instance, she recounts how as a child she would practise her ballet at the bus stop near her home: "My house...big garden...main road with cars, buses, bikes...me...a swan. Why at the bus-stop? Because there was a bar!" (*Gostan* 2012, 6). Her formal dance education in University Science Malaysia (USM) was also marked by the sociocultural and political developments of a young nation:

I learnt Terinai in the 1970s in USM. ... The 70's was an interesting time in USM, in the nation. 1969 riots, 1970 National Cultural Congress, 1971-1972 National Culture Policy, Malay Language, Malay Culture – What did it mean to be Malay? What did it mean to be non-Malay? Claim your nation and USM made it possible for us to claim,

so we did. We claimed culture, arts, politics, student politics, activism.

(*Gostan* 2012, 13)

The audience also hears of her transition from traditional conventions of dance training and education to more Western, individualistic and liberalised ways of dancing and dance-making when she went to New York. She did this “to move out of the realm of my [traditional] gurus. ... I needed to find me the dancer alone and me the choreographer. I was a young dancer wanting to learn choreography – to see if I could be a choreographer” (*Gostan* 2012, 6). Then there was her return to Malaysia from New York as a budding choreographer:

The year was 1981 when I came home ... an important year – when Mahathir Mohamad became prime minister. The young doctor from Kedah<sup>22</sup> constructing the nation. The young dancer from Johor Baru<sup>23</sup> constructing Malaysian Contemporary Dance. M and M in the bright lights. I was 28 years old.

(*Gostan* 2012, 9)

As D’Cruz developed her dance from the classical and traditional to the modern and contemporary, so her home country progressed toward a certain kind of modernisation, socioculturally and politically. Since her return from New York, D’Cruz’s choreographies have increasingly taken on political themes and *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* is her latest choreographic response to the current state of the country:

*Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* came out of a sense of extreme grief and loss, both personal and national. Personal, because I had lost my husband, Krishen, to death, and national, because in 2007, I felt that I was losing my country... to death. Crime, censorship, corruption, ... We had lost the plot. Blanked out. Censorship has escalated to ridiculousness. ... So as, the nation was going ‘Rah Rah Rah’ and celebrating 50 years of independence – I decided that I too would ‘rah rah’ and would put the crap on stage. To present and represent, and invent and reinvent Malaysia on stage. To look at the crap; to look for a sweeter, gentler Malaysia – lost and far away.

(*Gostan Forward* 2012, 2)

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<sup>22</sup> Kedah is a northern state located in the Peninsula Malaysia and shares its northern borders with southern Thailand.

<sup>23</sup> D’Cruz was born in Johor Baru and spent her childhood there. It is the capital of the southern state Johor in Peninsula Malaysia.

At the final segment of *Gostan Forward*, D’Cruz compares the state of the nation past and present with a particular Malay dance experience she had (Figure 1.5). She was asked to dance the male part of the Malay classical Terinai during the cultural festival of the Southeast Asia (SEA) Games, hosted by Malaysia in 1979. It provoked tense reactions in the press, where it was commented that “*Budak India tidak boleh menari Melayu*” (Malay: “Indians cannot dance Malay dance”) (*Gostan* 2012, 14). She concedes that certain things have since changed: “Now Indians can dance Malay dance, Malays can dance Chinese dances, Chinese can dance Malay dances...”. She comments that while the nation has regressed, “in some areas of dance we have progressed, forward, *Gostan Forward. Gostan Forward*” (*Gostan* 2012, 14). To *gostan* is to “go backward”, “to reverse”; a Malay colloquial for the term “go astern”. For D’Cruz, the nation and dance are measured in forward/backward movements: the nation *gostan* while dance moves forward. As the nation progresses or modernises with particular sociocultural and sociopolitical regressions, the nation’s dance modernises in another direction through oppositional sociopolitical imaginings and marginalised experiences.

D’Cruz’s metaphors of dance, movement and progress echo Lepecki’s proposition that dance and choreography are art forms of modernity as discussed in the introductory chapter. For Lepecki, dance is an artistic expression of modernity (2006b, 18) but he also invokes Randy Martin’s argument for the intersection between dance and politics, in that the very mobilisation of politics is the choreography of social movements and social change: “[p]olitics goes nowhere without movement” (Lepecki quoting Martin in 2006, 12). D’Cruz’s later political choreographies are indeed the artistic results of the country’s modernity. As the country is mobilised toward hegemonic constructions of modernity, D’Cruz’s choreographic modernities organise everyday bodies toward an alternative modernity that is already materialised in the bodies of the “nation’s margins” (Bhabha 1990, 291). In a country where political opposition is constantly overturned

by a dominant ruling party<sup>24</sup>, D’Cruz’s choreographies act as alternative political voices; by mobilising non-trained performers who represent the larger Malaysian society, D’Cruz choreographs the roles of a certain movement of civil society checking state hegemonic forces.



**Figure 1.5: The final scene of *Gostan Forward* where D’Cruz improvises with Terinai.  
Picture courtesy of Marion D’Cruz**

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<sup>24</sup> The political coalition National Front (Malay: Barisan Nasional) has been the ruling political body since the country’s independence. The majority of the components of the National Front represent the three dominant races: United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which look after the rights and interest of the three dominant racial groups of the country. Nevertheless gradual changes have been taking place in the political landscape of the country. Malaysia’s latest general elections in 2013 exhibited the National Front’s worst performance since the country’s independence with only 60% of parliamentary seats won. The remainder 40% of parliamentary seats were won by various opposition parties. For more information on Malaysia’s general elections in 2013, see The Economist online article ‘A Dangerous Result’ <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21577390-after-tainted-election-victory-najib-razak-needs-show-his-reformist-mettle-dangerous>. For a historical development of the coalition Barisan Nasional, see Cheah’s ‘1945-57: Malay Dominance and the Making of a “Malay Nation-State” ’ in *The Making of a Nation* where race-based political parties had their roots since pre-independent Malaysia when the British government were still in negotiation in setting up a local government in the country.

As described earlier, D’Cruz’s introduction to and training in post-modern and contemporary dances began with a stint in New York. Her education in progressive and innovative choreography took place outside her home country Malaysia. Upon her return, the budding choreographer was armed with different notions of aesthetic and political modernity that originated in an artistic and creative milieu with its own political sensibilities. Malaysia at that time, under the helm of Mahathir, was on a different track of modernity. Early collaborations with politicised artists such as painter Wong Hoy Cheong in *Sook Ching* (1990)<sup>25</sup> and involvement as founding member of arts collective Five Arts Centre (founded in 1984) with its avant-garde performances that are political in their content as well as aesthetics<sup>26</sup> could also have further galvanised D’Cruz’s own efforts at making political choreographies. Her different political choreographic and aesthetic modernity provided D’Cruz with the necessary artistic means to respond in transgression or amelioration choreographing alternative vision of the country’s pluralistic multicultural and multireligious society.

Commenting on modernity, Susan Stanford Friedman observes:

Modernity has a self-reflexive, experiential dimension that includes a gamut of sensations from displacement, despair, and nostalgia to exhilaration, hope, and embrace of the new – a range that depends in part on the configurations of power and the utopic versus the dystopic directions of change.

(2006, 433-434)

As much as *Gostan Forward* is about the artistic journey of a choreographer, it is also imbued with a sense of loss and nostalgia as D’Cruz relates her “sense of extreme grief” (*Gostan* 2012, 2) from personal as well as national perspectives. *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* is motivated by modernity’s (D’Cruz’s) “displacement, despair and nostalgia” for a “sweeter, gentler Malaysia – lost and far away”. Her

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<sup>25</sup> Throughout her dance career D’Cruz has collaborated in various capacities with artists from other disciplines. For instance, her critically acclaimed *Swan Song* (1988) saw her working with local visual artists such as Wong Hoy Cheong and Ismail Zain in different iterations of the performance.

<sup>26</sup> Comprising of drama, music, youth theatre, dance and visual art components, Five Arts Centre possesses distinctive pluralistic and collaborative characteristics among its artistic founding members in providing spaces for experimental and avant-garde performances that are interdisciplinary in its staging approaches. This would also extend to the collective’s approach to training and developing specifically Malaysian aspects of aesthetics in directing, producing, and scriptwriting. In its history of almost 30 years, Five Arts Centre has produced some of the most avant-garde performances that are interdisciplinary in nature with dedicated collaborative processes between drama, music and dance.

choreographic modernities in this instance portray the very “dystopic directions” of sociocultural and political inequalities that are also inevitably overturned to suggest “exhilaration” and “hope” in reimagining a utopic Malaysia.

### **Between Different Choreographic Modernities**

Azanin Ahmad’s and Marion D’Cruz’s differing choreographic modernities are the result of the different sociocultural and political milieux in which they have been located. Azanin’s Malay ethnicity gave her a privileged position in the formation of Malaysia’s 1980s brand of modern Malay modernity. As a Malayalee<sup>27</sup>, D’Cruz belongs to the ‘Others’ official state category of ethnicity, and questioned “what did it mean to be non Malay” in multicultural Malaysia. While the favoured Azanin received attention and built a successful choreographic career, the marginalised D’Cruz experienced a different artistic, cultural and political modernity in the wake of New York’s politicised performance and performance-making movements in the 1980s.

These different modern conditions are catalysts for both choreographers: Azanin innovates a distinctive style of Malay classical dance dramas and pioneers dances on screen while D’Cruz styles her choreographies with non-trained bodies in political performances. One remains in the dominant Malay artistic medium while the other seeks an alternative aesthetic in everyday vocabulary. In the past D’Cruz has rationalised her preference for non-trained bodies over culturally aesthetised ones by saying that non-trained performers possess “freer bodies” (*Gostan* 2012, 4). There is the question of how consciously D’Cruz’s artistic decision was influenced by her own politics to transgress a dominant cultural form – and invariably the political hegemony of Malay identity politics – when she originally based herself in and experimented with Malay dance vocabulary in early 1980s. There still seems to be a sense of artistic tension within D’Cruz: in the 2009 debut of *Gostan Forward*, in Kuala Lumpur, she recounted how her theatre colleague and peer Janet Pillai had told her

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<sup>27</sup> The Malayalee or Malayalam ethnic group originated from the southern Indian state of Kerala. Large populations of Malayalee people migrated to British colonial Malaysia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries to seek employment in the country and proceeded to become Malaysian citizens.

that the Malay form Terinai was her aesthetic and choreographic “backbone”. This particular conversation was omitted in the 2012 transcript<sup>28</sup> that I have referenced throughout this chapter. Also, there is the fact that D’Cruz begins *Gostan Forward* with a Malay joget and ends it with her rendition of Terinai. Returning to D’Cruz’s “political awakening”, her many collaborations with other political artists in the community might have further contributed to her political ‘awakening’ and awareness. Azanin, on the other hand, worked very much on her own as an independent choreographer with a singular artistic vision in producing her performances.

Gaonkar qualifies that modernity from the West continues to be globally pervasive, “always in opportunistic fragments accompanied by utopic rhetorics” (2001, 1). These “fragments” of Western modernities with their own “utopic rhetorics” can be likened to the new ways of performing and creating (political) dances that D’Cruz encountered and embodied in New York and continued to do so in her return to Malaysia. Through the process of “creative adaptation” (Gaonkar 2001, 18) within Malaysia’s sociocultural and political contexts, D’Cruz then innovates her very own forms political dances. To follow Gaonkar’s assumption that modernity can be understood as “an attitude of questioning the present” (2001, 13) then D’Cruz uses her choreographic modernity in her political performances to question the inequalities of a hegemonic Malay modernity. Azanin’s choreographic modernities, however, took on a more complicated development where they first reinvigorated particular traditional Malay aesthetics that were considered parochial and non-progressive for the purpose of a certain state-sanctioned modernity, which led to state support and endorsement for her dance dramas. Unfortunately, fickle change in socio-political as well as religious policies meant that Azanin could not enjoy sustained official and financial endorsement in her specific Malay choreographic practices.

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<sup>28</sup> The omission perhaps could simply be attributed to the fact of editing unfamiliar references – in this case, Malaysian theatre practitioner Janet Pillai – for an international audience. The 2012 version of *Gostan Forward*, in which the transcript was based, was used as textual reference for Japanese audiences where D’Cruz performed the piece at the 2012 Asian Contemporary Dance Festival in Kobe, Japan.

## Networks of Themes and Traits

In examining these Malaysian choreographers and the emergence of their choreographic modernities, certain key elements in this chapter can be considered as informing the following four chapters. First, the methodology of case studies – as in the dance figures of Azanin and D’Cruz and their choreographic modernities – runs throughout this thesis. Second, the examination and analyses of differing ideas and notions pertaining to movement and mobility in this chapter will also be extended to the following chapters. For example, due to Azanin’s ethnicity and socioeconomic status, she was privileged by state rhetorics of national identity and therefore gained a certain kind of cultural and social capital within the dominant public sphere in Malaysia through her choreographies. D’Cruz, on the other hand, encountered a different mobility due to her minority ethnicity by traveling to New York to learn new body techniques that enabled her to develop different cultural capital and social that contests state hegemonies. As for movements, both Azanin and D’Cruz experimented with dance vocabularies to produce choreographic modernities based on their individual cultural and social capital. Another way to examine mobility would be Azanin’s and D’Cruz’s *mobilisations* of their dances and dancers, and the implications for a larger understanding of social and cultural formations in their communities. As I have mentioned, Azanin’s Malay choreographies served to mobilise the national imaginary within the framework of a state-driven identity, while D’Cruz’s “everyday” choreographies have sought to mobilise a civil society in action, moving to contest hegemonic state socioeconomic and sociocultural policies. In the following chapters, various aspects of movement and mobility are also closely examined through Klunchun and the Amrita dancers and their numerous choreographic experimentations and artistic existence against their diverse sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

There are also other issues, themes, and motifs in this particular chapter that serve to inform my research into the choreographic modernities of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers. While the theme of transformation runs through this entire thesis, elements of change, modification and development occur most obviously in Chapter



2 when I analyse how rhythm becomes key to the ways Klunchun and the Amrita dancers experiment with their classical forms to create contemporary or present day choreographies. Body techniques, dance vocabulary and styles undergo different processes of change that enable the dancers to create new ways of dancing and choreographing, just as in Azanin's and D'Cruz's choreographic modernities.

In studying the dance works of Azanin and D'Cruz, I have also examined individual career paths, dance backgrounds and ideologies, present and past choreographic styles, and the broader sociocultural, economic and political environments within which these emerged. In other words, I focus on individuals who are artists, first and foremost, and then as personalities with distinct work methods and perspectives on their dance forms and how the dancers innovate with them. Issues of identity and personality are explored further in Chapter 3 where I examine how transformations of certain dance techniques provide us with insights into the artist as an individual. In this chapter I focus specifically on the individuals Klunchun and Amrita dancer Phon Sopheap, and examine their distinct approaches to carving out outstanding artistic identities and career trajectories for themselves.

The element of participation in the cases of Azanin and D'Cruz surfaces in various ways through their choreographies. Azanin's televised performances signal not only a new way of viewing and perceiving a cultural product through modern electronic technology but the viewing through mass media implicates viewers in the participation of an imaginary national identity. D'Cruz then mobilises as well as redefines the idea of civil society with the participation of her non-trained performers consisting of different professions and, through her political dances, the passive spectator – as well as the performer – is also transformed into a politicised body through reflections on her choreographic transgressions. All these different discussions recur when I examine the collective performances in the individual examples of Klunchun's company dancers and the Amrita dancers in Chapter 4. Through the reconfiguration of the ensemble in performance, we see how group interactions in the ways which the Amrita dancers and Klunchun's dancers move and express themselves deviate from their classical conventions. This then leads to

implications for a different way of viewing for the spectators who are more familiar to the dancers' traditional modes of performances.

Both Azanin and D'Cruz created (and continue to create) their dance works at different kinds of modernities that were sanctioned by the nation. Briefly, the 1980s in Malaysia represented a cultural modernity that was running counter to the Western-influenced modernity, in that Mahathir was asserting Malay culture as a national identity. In addition, he initially implemented policies that aspired to the economic progress and development seen in Japan. This was followed by the essentialised idea of multiculturalism for a modern Malaysia in the 1990s and the 2000s. While Azanin profited from the state-driven modernity in the 1980s, D'Cruz countered state rhetoric through her dances. Conversely, Azanin and her dance dramas was also sidetracked and neglected when Islamisation of the nation in the 1990s took effect in Malaysia – this time Mahathir's modern Malaysia took another counter-stance to Western modernity by turning to Islam for its guiding principles on national progress and development. The theme of such dynamic tensions demonstrated above occur as well throughout this thesis when Klunchun and the Amrita dancers go against traditional conventions and national sanctions of classical Khon conventions. On a local scale, while Thai and Cambodian classical masters fiercely protect their art forms against the Westernising influences of popular culture, there are also certain dilutions of the classical conventions *within* the classical community. Yet Klunchun and the Amrita dancers continually practice their classical forms, but they also prefer to experiment in contemporary performance.

The previous illustration is just one example of the many degrees of dynamic tensions that are brought to focus in Chapter 5. The idea of aesthetics, disciplining and conditioning are brought to bear on the performing body as the Amrita dancers negotiate different tensions that occur as they learn new dance techniques and perform internationally. For instance, as they tour their performances and learn new body disciplines, the Amrita dancers benefit economically and artistically, but they also experience physical discomforts and disorientations as a result of their long-haul travel, like jet lag, and unfamiliar physical techniques that can potentially lead to

injuries. The roiling changes of economic, cultural and political conditions within and outside their home countries constantly produce disjunctures to their dance practices along with their physical, economic, social and cultural well-being. Conversely, the dancers also stand to gain in numerous ways from these multiple and sometimes conflicting modernities. Set in the networks of touring performances and international festival networks, I examine how these Amrita dancers respond to different modernities and even 'counter-modernities' that have implications for the way they innovate their choreographies.

Thus far I have analysed choreographic modernities in Azanin's and D'Cruz's choreographies and choreographic methods through historical documentation with some supplementary live performance analyses, as in D'Cruz's performances *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* and *Gostan Forward*, which I managed to watch live. The result of this inquiry thus far is limited to performance interpretation analysed against the backdrop of historical artistic developments and the larger context of state-constructed sociocultural and political rhetorics. In studying Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers, I had the opportunity to observe and contribute to creative processes in the studio, as well as to watch the completed performances.

Therefore investigations and discussions in the next four chapters arise from detailed inspections of choreographic aspects that would not have been possible with performance analysis alone. Choreographic elements of rhythm, gesture and characterisation are closely inspected from the rehearsal studios to technical and dress rehearsals to final performances, to ascertain the transformative processes that allow for new dance forms and styles: choreographic modernities in the making, as it were. In doing so, I posit that creative changes and adaptations in choreographies emerge at many various 'micro levels' of dance as well. Additionally, I argue that these creative choreographic transformations also potentially take place at practical and material phases of creation and rehearsal rather than in and out of intangible and abstract conceptualisations.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**RHYTHMIC OPERATIONS:**  
**Material Description and Analysis in Dance**

**Introduction**

This chapter is based on my observations of dancers and choreographers at work in the rehearsal studio. It examines practical strategies taken by Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun and the Cambodian dancers of Amrita as they experimented with classical dance forms and conventions. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I had the opportunity to observe Klunchun and the Amrita dancers in rehearsal in my capacity as a dramaturg on some projects, and an observer on others. During this time, I noted specific strategies that they took in solving compositional as well as aesthetic problems, such as developing gestures for a scene, sustaining phrases and effecting transitions from one scene to another, and creating new movements of diverse qualities based on the classical forms they are most familiar with.

A point of commonality that I observed was Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers' use of particular aspects of their classical dance practice to devise new forms. This is not novel, as many Southeast Asian dance practitioners with roots in classical and traditional performances regularly experiment with their previous training. For instance, Indonesia's Boi Sakti, Sadono Kusomo and Ery Mefri begin their work from a basis in Silat Randai, Javanese dance and Minang Silat, respectively. The Amrita dancers draw on Cambodian Lakhon Kaol and Robam Kbach Boran<sup>29</sup> in their experimental dance works, while Klunchun utilises Thai Khon, in which he is a firm believer and whose importance he frequently advocates.

Khon, Lakhon Kaol and Robam Kbach Boran are all dance dramas that use codified movements and gestures to narrate the transposed Indian myth of the

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<sup>29</sup> Robam Kbach Boran refers to the all-female classical court dance drama, except for the monkey role while Lakhon Kaol refers to the classical all-male dance drama (Burridge and Frumberg 2010, 211).

Ramayana, known as the *Ramakien* in Thai, and *Reamker* in Khmer. The forms share a common history and tradition, with similar physical vocabularies, training methods and performance narratives. This can simplify the comparison and role of these cultural forms in choreographic experimentation. At the same time, the components of gesture and physical vocabulary encompass a very substantial part of these dance forms. Each gesture is assigned specific meaning or symbolism that aids the dancer in telling their story. Hence it may not be ideal to use (and compare) classical gestures and movements as foundations to experimental dance considering the large lexicon of specific and differentiated gestures that constitute these classical forms. Also, it is not always the case that Klunchun and the Amrita dancers start their exploration of experimental dance works from a classical vocabulary in the same way or with the same motivation.

The more common point between the two sets of experimental practice is actually more fundamental to the classical conventions employed. I discovered that Klunchun and the Amrita dancers utilised their classical rhythms to refine specific scenes, create particular links between phrases, or even shape choreographic and aesthetic strategies over the course of an entire performance. This observation developed out of one particular rehearsal exercise with Amrita, where I was directly involved in the process of using classical rhythm to shape the dramaturgy of a segment. Improvising with the classical rhythm could simply have been the solution to the specific problem they had encountered. However, my subsequent observations in some of Klunchun's dance exercises and rehearsals revealed that he too had a tendency to isolate the element of Khon rhythm, as a catalyst for producing new movements in rehearsal.

Rhythm plays a significant role in classical Cambodian and Thai training and performance. In fact, most classical dances in the Southeast Asian region, from Indonesian court forms such as Serimpi and Bedoyo, to Odissi and Bharata Natyam from India, employ distinctive rhythm structures. Strict adherence to the beat ideally leads to perfect performer synchronicity, immaculate visual aesthetics and masterly dramatic pacing, thereby determining the quality of the performance. Rhythm is also

a training fundamental that is drilled into the young performer from the outset. It is intrinsic to Cambodian and Thai dance, and therefore provides a common element for examining dancemaking in the two countries, if not the entire Southeast Asia region.

In discussing modernity David Giddens writes of “the separation of time from space” as a feature of modernity where “modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies” (1990, 19). Pertaining to the idea of rhythm in this chapter, the rapid infrastructural and economic changes in urban centres such as Phnom Penh and Bangkok with international commerce and trade have impacts on how time is perceived in local sociocultural practices. International money markets that open at different times of the day in relation to Phnom Penh would have already altered particular social and cultural practices in people’s daily lives. Not to mention the proliferation of Western lifestyle culture introduced in the Cambodian capital from late night bars and cafés to the idea of 24-hour convenience stores that did not exist in local socio-economic practices. Traditional as well as classical cultural practices are usually associated with local customs and rituals that possess their own sense of time, such as particular folk or religious festivals and social events. The question here is what happens when other temporalities are specifically introduced to rhythmic cultural practices such as dance.

By closely examining the setting, fluctuations and transformations of dance rhythm in this chapter, I argue that dance experimentation based on classical conventions can be analysed through a component that is integral to traditional dance. What I offer here are ‘distilled’ analyses of how effective rhythmic strategies were used in several dancemaking processes, and propose that these can help us understand specific choreographic experimentation undertaken by the Thai and Cambodian dancers studied. I also consider the implications of this approach for a wider understanding of contemporary dance practices in Southeast Asia.

## **Rhythm Situation #1: Sustaining Creativity**

In early August 2010, I spent five days in Phnom Penh working with choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon on the dance piece *Khmeropedies I & II*. It was developed principally with four dancers invited by Amrita Performing Arts, and had previously been staged as a work-in-progress in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore. I was invited to assist Phuon dramaturgically in advance of the official premiere of the piece in Singapore. In a particular rehearsal, Phuon asked if I could assist her in developing a scene for *Khmeropedies I & II* between dancers Chumvan Sodhachiv (Belle) and Chey Chankethya (Kethya).

Set in a classical training studio, the scene relates how Belle and Kethya ‘play’ with their classical dance gestures to explore the possibilities of contemporary dance. Belle tries out new movements that incorporate gestures from the classical repertoire. As the scene progresses, Kethya is supposed to join in. During the rehearsal, Phuon suggests that Belle be more expressive. The choreographer relays to me how she wants Belle to ‘seduce and ‘flirt’ with the audience through a series of smiles, ranging from joy to mischievousness, surprise to sensuousness. Phuon feels that Belle isn’t projecting the correct facial expressions as there is no change of different states during her dance.

The prescribed facial expression for female classical Cambodian dancers is fixed and held constant for almost the entire length of the performance. It is the hint of a smile, or a half smile – slightly upturned corners of the mouth – that is unchanging, like that of a puppet’s face. Phuon explains that she wants to “put some life” into Belle’s and Kethya’s dances. In the midst of demonstrating the dance, Phuon interjects that Belle is not fully immersed in it, and that Belle is hesitating at certain transition points. Although Belle had performed the scene for work-in-progress showings in New York and Hong Kong, presently she seems to have forgotten some of part of it.

Phuon then tells me that it has been a while since they rehearsed this segment. In addition to Belle trying to remember the details of the dance, Phuon

feels that the flow of movements has always been awkward. As choreographer and dancer try to smoothen these out, I ask if the accompanying music might be the problem – ‘Cello Sonata in D Minor’ (L. 135, 1935), by Claude Debussy. I sensed that the melancholic tone of the piece might be at odds with what Phuon was trying to achieve in Belle’s playful and ‘flirty’ dance. I feel that Belle cannot ‘get into’ the music. She is affected by the sombre melody, and perhaps the fact that it is a Western classical piece. Her body becomes rigid and formalistic, as she responds by trying to emulate balletic poses and gestures, even though she has no ballet training.

At that point, Phuon and I listen to alternative music pieces, but there is nothing that leaves a strong impression in terms of melody, nor elicits emotions that we feel Belle could respond to physically. Belle tries doing the scene without musical accompaniment. Phuon then adds that while Belle’s choreography must flow throughout the dance, she must also portray the exploratory and improvisational aspects of her dance as if she is discovering the movements for the first time. Hence Belle begins the scene by slowly trying out new movements, initially taking ‘baby steps’ away from her familiar classical gestures, sometimes getting stuck in mid-movement, sometimes moving quickly ahead with an inspired turn or jump. The dance expands as Belle becomes more assured in her movements and gains confidence in experimenting.

Mid-improvisation, I suggest that the dancers try something from their training. Most Asian classical dance instructors employ particular rhythms to teach and familiarise students with dance steps. These rhythms are articulated orally and beaten out physically via clapping hands, or beating a drum, bells or wooden clapper. For instance, the gurus of the South Indian Bharata Natyam form use a four-count phrase “Taka Dimi” to keep time in footwork training, while Thai Khon relies on the phrase “Dum-dum Dum-dum”. I suggest that Kethya keep time for Belle’s improvisation with the phrase they are most familiar with: “Tak Ting-ting-ting”, which then expands to “Tak Ting-ting-ting, Tak-ting-ting”.



After several attempts at having Kethya keep count for Belle, the new segment becomes a more cohesive narrative of Belle and Kethya's experimental exploits; they are learning dance in different ways, but with the aid of the familiar rhythms. Kethya's playful yet focused "Tak Ting-ting-ting" helps Belle to develop a spirited dance that incorporates conventionally outstretched, flexed wrists with unusual jerky repetitions, gyrating hips and shoulder rolls. She periodically breaks away from the slow and graceful Apsara promenade to run and jump.

The newly discovered rhythmic relationship between Kethya and Belle also prompts Belle to be more expressive toward Kethya in her facial expressions. Now they range from mischievous play to exuberant joy, as if saying, "Look at me, I am having fun trying different dances." In the final version performed in Singapore (2010), Belle begins her dance while Kethya watches. She tries different movements until she gets stuck in mid-phrase, and Kethya encourages her by reciting the "Tak Ting-ting-ting" rhythm. Belle is able to continue with her improvisation. Later on she gets stuck again, but she is urged on by Kethya's rhythmic recitation until she completes her improvisation with another particular classical position where Belle tries to 'unlock' her classical straight and flexed back. With the help of Kethya calling out the rhythm, Belle gradually responds by softening her back and begins to make side-to-side, swaying movements with her torso instead of being fixed in a ramrod position.

### **Subtraction in Dance**

In 'One Less Manifesto', Gilles Deleuze writes that Italian theatremaker Carmelo Bene's performances undergo a process of "subtraction" or "amputation" of performance elements to "release a new potentiality of theatre" that is "present and actual" ([1978] 1997; 239, 242, 254). According to Deleuze, theatre's "new potentiality" is one that releases a "continuous variation" of creativity, thereby producing a theatre that is affective rather than representational. This 'new potential' is realised when conventional elements of representation such as language, narrative, gesture and character are subtracted or "neutralized" because these elements "constitute or represent a system of power".

Deleuze states that by amputating the power ordinarily represented on stage by kings and princes, and historical narratives, Bene “changes not only the theatrical matter but also the form of theater, which ceases to be a “representation” ” ([1979] 1997, 241). This ‘new form and matter of theatre’ operates through expressions of affect along a line of “continuous variation”, of immanent creativity. “Minor” elements in a theatre performance are then able to develop.

I draw attention to Deleuze’s argument for a process of generative subtraction because it reveals the qualities of a phenomenon “under a new light” ([1979] 1997, 245), and has implications for understanding the ‘inner workings’ of contemporary dance that focuses attention on the dance itself. Just as in Deleuze’s notion of a theatre of ‘new potential’, experimental dance can possess the potential of “continuous variation” in its myriad of expressions, styles, choreographies and experimentations. By focusing on the particularities of a single choreographic element in rehearsal situations, dancers such as Belle and Kethya uncovered new qualities in their familiar classical movements and gestures. These qualities went beyond the codified meanings of the poses and gestures, and led Belle and Kethya to become more expressive in their improvisations.

Through ‘generative subtraction’ Belle’s multiple points of focus are removed during the improvisation: the use of classical gestures, the story of her experimentations, her efforts to ‘perform’ and ‘present’ for an audience, and the various kinds of music to which she tried to dance, are ‘excised’. More importantly representational power is ‘dis-associated’ from Cambodian classical gestures, which usually denote royal archetypes and authoritative magical characters. Just as, according to Deleuze, Bene ‘amputates’ the “royal and princely system” of signification in *Richard III* to focus on Richard’s emotional and physical attributes rather than the text (Deleuze [1979] 1997; 240), the significance of the hero prince Rama or princess Sita, and the mythical Apsara nymphs is decreased from the Cambodian gestures, along with accompanying textual narratives.

The result was that Belle had a single focus on the classical rhythm, articulated externally by Kethya but intimately familiar to Belle from her many years of training. This enabled the scene to develop with a new creativity that had not been present before. Belle was now more at ease in moving from one gesture to another without interruptions or inventive obstacles, developing the dance narrative with more imaginative and creative movements as a result of being more playful and less self-conscious.

Phuon and also I observed that as the improvisation progressed, the speed of the “Tak Ting-ting-ting” varied throughout the improvisation. Much as Belle tried to keep time with Kethya’s “Tak Ting-ting-ting”, Kethya also adjusted the pace and speed of her recitation to Belle’s movements. Kethya would slow down her recitation in response to Belle’s slower movements, and gradually accelerate her “Tak Ting-ting-ting” when Belle sped up her movements. In turn, Belle responded to Kethya’s pacing when she became uncertain of how to continue, as if allowing the rhythm to be her ‘guide’ to the next step of the improvisation.

In examining Bene’s theatrical gestures, Deleuze notes that it is the fluctuating speeds of actions on stage in relation to other elements that account for a continuous flow of creativity and affect:

What counts in variation are the relations of speed or sluggishness, the modifications of these relations as they carry gestures and *énoncés* along a line of transformation, in accordance with variable coefficients.

([1978] 1997, 249. Emphasis in original)

According to Deleuze, the “variation” or creative process never stops and continues to grow and expand as the speeds of two performance elements are ‘pitched against each other’ in shifting degrees of briskness or otherwise. As discussed above, Kethya’s ‘rhythmic’ relationship to Belle’s gestures altered in terms of speed. This in turn provided a catalyst for Belle to create new dance movements and gestures with greater ease and less effort than when she had to deal with numerous conditions pegged into the improvisation. In the next example, I will further illustrate how

'generative subtraction' and different tempos are also used effectively in a dance workshop as means of devising contemporary choreographies.

### **Rhythm Situation #2: Unfettered Improvisation**

In early 2012, the dance department of Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) invited Pichet Klunchun to choreograph a short piece for a diploma student showcase, entitled *Crossings*. The showcase consisted of various dance performances from ballet to modern and contemporary dance pieces. Ten students from different levels of NAFA's dance diploma programme, with different backgrounds in formal and informal dance training from ballet, modern, contemporary, to hip hop, participated in Klunchun's piece entitled *Krouw Nai*. The students rehearsed with Klunchun for two weeks in early March, and a rehearsal director from the academy oversaw subsequent rehearsals. I observed Klunchun's work with the NAFA students over the period of a week.

Even though the NAFA students have no experience in classical Thai dance, Klunchun starts rehearsals sessions for *Krouw Nai* with his 'Khon class'. This is something he does with classical contemporary performance rehearsals alike when working with his company of dancers in Bangkok. It is a routine of warm-ups and body conditioning for the work ahead. Just as in the repertory ballet discipline, Thai and Cambodian classical dance training include sessions that review basic positions and physical vocabularies. These exercises are done to build strength. Klunchun's 'Khon class' is a series of exercises developed from physical stances and positions with articulated hand gestures.

Klunchun and the dancers begin standing in an upright position, legs apart and parallel to the shoulders, with feet pointing away from each other. Accompanied by fast-paced, staccato traditional music, the dancers slowly move down vertically until they reach a deep *demi-plié* position, with knees at 90 degrees, and then upward until they recover. The movement is then repeated. After five to eight minutes, Klunchun, who is leading, changes the position by moving the feet side to side, and adds hand-limb gestures including the Thai *jeeb*, where the thumb touches

the index finger and the three other fingers are fanned out. Hereafter, the movements progress to include lifts of the feet in stomping action, followed by clockwise and anti-clockwise turns and swivels. On the first day of rehearsal, Klunchun gave little instruction or explanation to the NAFA students but requested that they simply follow him in the Khon exercises.

After these exercises, Klunchun begins the improvisation session by playing a second piece of traditional Thai music entitled 'Krouw Nai' which subsequently becomes the title of the students' performance. At this point students are encouraged to improvise to the music. They are also instructed to move or travel in a diagonal from one corner of the rehearsal floor to the other. They then go back to the original corner and start again. Klunchun's requirements for the improvisation are brief, in that he just wants the students to move in any way possible across the space. During initial sessions, the students try their best to make out the beats of the music while moving in a variety of ways that they have been taught: from balletic movements with outstretched arms and feet *en pointe*, to free improvisation learned in modern and contemporary classes.

Klunchun makes them go back to the start corner and tells them to just "react to the music" and "stop worrying about 'dancing' to the music". He emphasises the importance being themselves when they dance. He does not tell them specifically how to move, but he gives pointers on how their movements must follow through to the entire body; that if a certain movement begins at the hands, he wants the students to be aware how that movement would affect the rest of the body or where and how the movement would shift to a different part of the body. After a week or so of this exercise, the students realise they cannot be in sync with the fast-paced Thai music. They then begin to improvise a variety of movements outside the vocabularies they are familiar with.

At this point, Klunchun imposes new conditions on them. First, he tries to remove external aesthetic forms the students have learned in their classes at NAFA. He encourages them again to move according to individual impulses and desires

rather than be hampered by the rules and conditions of formal disciplines. He wants them to 'feel' their way through the 'Krouw Nai' music, and just express their responses at that moment. Read against Deleuze's 'amputation' process, elements of highly structured aesthetic representations are cut away in hope that the body will reveal "continuous variation" of moving that is immanent to the individual body, to express freely the affects of the dancing body.

Secondly, to further assist in releasing the dancing body's expressive qualities, Klunchun focuses greater attention on the staccato 'Krouw Nai' music. Two conditions are created here. The unfamiliar and even strange music prevents the students' reliance on familiar dance techniques. Forbidden their formalised ways of moving, the students then begin to respond in a more reflexive way to the "foreign" music: responses that include physical resistance to it. This gives rise to a "continuous variation" of individualised and unique choreographies among the students released by their own moving bodies. For instance, a particular maledancer was initially trying his best to dance in balletic movements to the 'Krouw Nai' but gradually he accessed street dance and hip hop movements that he had acquired outside the dance academy. The erratic and jerky body pops and locks of hip-hop vocabulary complemented the fast paced rhythm better and provided a better physical base for him to improvise more freely.

The third condition is the rhythm of the 'Krouw Nai' itself. There are no obvious beats or counts to the piece and it has an even more vague melody, with the Thai wooden xylophone providing rapid sliding notes and tones, underpinned by irregular drumbeats, which together produce a percussive, staccato sound. Throughout the 24-minute long piece, the speed fluctuates between rapid and slow. Additionally, to the untrained ear, the shifts from faster to slower segments and vice versa are as sudden as they are random. The irregular rhythm and the ever fluctuating speeds of the 'Krouw Nai' music forces the students to move in an unregulated way that just seems as frenetic as the music.

During a rehearsal break, Klunchun mentions to me, “They [the student] cannot dance ballet, modern or contemporary with the ‘Krouw Nai’ music, they can’t ‘get’ the beat. They have to find something inside them, they have to express their own characters.” The ‘generative subtraction’ of Klunchun forbidding the students to fall back on their formal dance training means they are left with their ‘own bodies’, as a resource for moving and gesturing. As for the “something inside”, it is the internal rhythm that the students learned to generate. This initial rhythm was actually instilled in the students by way of Klunchun’s ‘Khon class’. The choreographer explains that his ‘Khon class’ does more than body conditioning. It also serves to focus the dancers’ minds through a consistent set of repeated movements that regulate their breathing and focus their internal rhythms, thereby establishing the conditions for them to achieve a meditative state. He elaborates that this meditative state is an inward focus of the mind and body, alerting the dancing body while sharpening the body’s kinesthetic abilities (my paraphrasing).

In Klunchun’s words, the “alert body” is “able to move free from the mind” and the dancing body can express itself without the mind controlling it, moving without pre-conditioned ways that may be entrenched because of previous body disciplines. Klunchun’s explanations may seem abstract, and do not give us a concrete sense of how the students dance or move. I take him to mean that the focused breathing produced a focused internal rhythm in individual students. This in turn results in them being affected and responding physically and even emotionally to the ‘Krouw Nai’ music rather than relying on previous imposed learned rhythms and gestures.

As rehearsals continue, the students start to develop physical “shakes” and “stutters” as part of their movements, as if the only way to respond in time with the rapid music is to shake their bodies furiously. Everyday gestures are also incorporated into the stutters and Klunchun urges the students to express emotion through their faces and even verbalise how they feel as they move along the diagonal. Some begin to form new physical movements and drop the stuttering, while others expand on it. What’s more, the students’ individual continuous

choreographic variations take on different speeds, levels and spatial dimensions. They may stutter at high speed in one moment, shift to a slow walk in another, then jump in fits and starts that come to a completely frozen pose before sprinting away quickly.

As the improvisation progresses, the students discover movements and gestures that function at varying degrees of emotional intensity, speed, and height. Just as in the case of Belle and Kethya, the NAFA students too are able to sustain their creative improvisation by responding at different speeds and with diverse gestures to the fluctuating rhythms of the music. In addition to the relational effects of contrasting speeds within two performance elements on releasing “continuous variation”, Deleuze also states that the two elements must not in run parallel (1997, 250). There needs to be an intermingling of the two streams of performance elements in order to sustain the continuous effects of creativity. While the students dance and gesticulate *against* the ‘Krouw Nai’ music, Klunchun then sets them a task of taking on the character of a chicken with all the animal’s physical traits and vocal sounds. This characterisation provided another layer that added new physical dimensions to the students’ dance improvisations. Hence, the sustained creativity in the choreographies of these students changes constantly, always remaining fresh, surprising and playful while their bodies are fully move at ease in diverse ways. For instance,

During the actual performance of ‘Krouw Nai’ in *Crossings*, the dancers began upstage left, dressed in everyday clothing. Just as in their rehearsals, as the music begins, each dancer moves downstage right on a diagonal to his or her own style and rhythm. Once the dancer reaches their destination, he or she returns to the point of origin at upstage left and the cycle is repeated. Their dances are individualistic and expressive in that their movements and gestures are born from their physical traits and abilities, reflecting the individual emotions of each dancer. Their dance performance presents expressions of affect, free of the representational aesthetics that conform rigidly to the regimented forms in their formal classes, such as ballet or



modern dance, as examples of genres that are representational and express of power through different means.

In the second half of the performance, the dancers begin to interact with one another, sometimes extending their individual dances and at other times forming little duets or trios along the diagonal. The important thing is that the dancers seem to engage each other in new and different ways every time they rehearse the second half of the segment. The improvisations manage to remain transformative and fresh. As described earlier, the dancers travel in a diagonal with their movements and gestures. As they finish one particular length of the diagonal, their movements change again in the next diagonal route, never to be repeated during their different dance journeys through the diagonal trajectory.

### **Rhythm Situation #3: From Destabilisation to New Movements**

Previously Klunchun has also used the 'Krouw Nai' music in improvisation exercises with his own company. As a dramaturg working with Klunchun on his contemporary work *Black and White* (2011), I saw how Klunchun's dancers improvised new movements through the use of different rhythms. *Black and White* was based on the Khon physical vocabulary of the monkey and demon roles. Instead of following the conventional monkey-demon battle narratives of the Ramayana, however, Klunchun choreographed a performance to demonstrate the ambiguity inherent in relations of conflict and support. In one particular segment of the performance, four male dancers present themselves individually with mini solos unique to each dancer. In this solo segment, the dancers moved away from Khon vocabulary to create individual qualities in their movements.

In addition to the regular warm-up and body conditioning sessions of the 'Khon class' mentioned earlier, Klunchun devised another form of physical exercise. Created at the beginning of work on *Black and White*, it enabled his dancers to improvise movements that deviated from their Khon vocabulary. For these solo segments, the new exercise had each dancer improvise by beginning with their respective monkey or demon vocabulary. As the improvisation progressed, the

dancers began to move more freely until they found new gestural and movement vocabularies. For this purpose, Klunchun used the 'Krouw Nai' music. While the initial 'Khon class' is underscored with traditional music that produces a regular rhythm with a recognisable melody, the 'Krouw Nai' music is fast paced with indiscernible fluctuating rhythms, and destabilises the dancers' familiar rhythms. During the solo improvisation, the dancers started with their familiar Khon vocabulary, but they soon transformed their movements as they moved increasingly quickly to the unrelenting pace of the 'Krouw Nai' music. There is a certain measured rhythm in conventional Khon that is undermined by the unevenness of 'Krouw Nai'. Deleuze and Guattari cite two elements that illustrate the concept of variation: language and music. According to them, when music attains sustained immanent creativity or variation, the form does not contain apparent notes or scales of composition such as in western music: a "generalized chromaticism" is achieved. The sustained current of musical creativity is now a continual stream of fluctuating pitches (1988, 105).

The 'Krouw Nai' music could be said to exhibit characteristics of this "generalized chromaticism" and therefore introduces variation in creativity to initiate variation among the movements of both Klunchun's NAFA students and his *Black and White* dancers in the solos improvisation. In the case of the solo improvisations, the rapid music imparted an environment for his Khon dancers to explore movement ideas and possibilities beyond the comfort of their classical repertoire. Khon gestures and movements were slowly subtracted to make way for more variety in their physical expressions. For instance, one of the four dancers, Padung, begins his improvisation with his Khon monkey movements where his body exhibited a low centre of gravity with bended knees. The positions of monkey arms are also close to the body with bent elbows. As Padung responded to the music, he began to straighten his torso and also extend his arms to move in different speeds.

The resulting four solos that were eventually inserted into *Black and White* differed from one another, with some hints of Khon vocabulary remaining. The dancers still mostly travelled from one spot to another in profile, with their stiff,

upright postures. Each solo displayed distinct physical traits to differentiate distinct characters. The first dancer's solo resembled Khon monkey movements most closely, while the second dancer's movements suggested the physical traits of the crane bird; the third was robotic and upright with straight, outstretched, scissor-motined arms, and the fourth was almost entirely performed in a demi-plié position, with slow contortions of the back from side-to-side relative to the audience. The second, third and fourth dancers usually danced the demon role, which exhibits different kinds of physical traits from the newly improvised ones. Some of the demon physical characteristics include strong rigid upper body positions with arms also closely placed to the body with bent elbows, similar to the monkey physical traits. The new movements exhibited features and positions that were sometimes counter to the classical vocabulary.

It must also be said that there is a cultural dimension to be considered in examining the effectiveness of the 'Krouw Nai' music, rather than entirely attributing the phenomenon to the concepts proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. Klunchun's dancers may have simply just responded physically in a different way to the 'Krouw Nai' rhythms than from their classical vocabulary. The 'Khon class' music in Klunchun's rehearsals could have been closely associated with Khon vocabulary, where his dancers have been physically conditioned to refer to Khon movements. Conversely, the fluctuating rhythms of the 'Krouw Nai' piece could have prompted his dancers to move in different ways. The kinesthetic conditioning of physical repetition and reinforcement during performances, rehearsals and training may have differentiated 'Khon music' (for warm-up and body conditioning) and 'non-Khon music' ('Krouw Nai') for the dancers to the point they would break away from their regular Khon movements with unfamiliar music or rhythms.

While classical performances in Southeast Asia seem to exhibit a rigid set of rules and principles that demand fixed choreography and ways of performing, there are also free spaces of play and improvisation. Dance dramas in Thailand (Khon), Cambodia (Lakhon Kaol), Malaysia (Mak Yong), and Indonesia (Randai) adhere to certain conventions in narrative, plot, basic gestures and positions. However,

individual choreographers may create subtle variations by re-arranging choreography within the larger structure of the narrative or performance. During Khon rehearsals, Klunchun and his dancers undergo short sessions of improvisation before they settle on how a classical performance should be staged, in terms of which part of the Ramakien should be presented or specifically chosen in the case of a commission, and how exactly it should be choreographed. In these rehearsals, I have noticed that Klunchun's dancers are playful and creative with their Khon vocabulary to enhance a particular scene.

With contemporary dance work, perhaps it is Klunchun's objective to start his dancers on the 'safe' and familiar platform of classical music while slowly moving away from classical dance to more experimental movements. The 'generative subtraction' is at work when this exercise is expanded incrementally, building on successive improvisations until the dancers produce movements that are radically different from what they are used to. At the end, Khon vocabulary is removed and the variation in new ways of moving continues to proliferate.

### **The Isolated Rhythm and Other Influences**

In the three scenarios above, I have drawn on Deleuze's concept of 'generative subtraction' to explain how an altered element of performance result in choreographic modernities that contribute to the making of contemporary performances. Belle with Kethya, and Klunchun with both his NAFA students and his company dancers complicate their conventional use of rhythm to generate new dance vocabularies. Belle and Kethya varied the speed and pacing of a familiar rhythm pattern to help develop their improvisation. Klunchun subtracted dance skills learned by the NAFA students in order for them to create movement and gesture when confronted with an unfamiliar rhythm.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Klunchun's dancers learned a

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<sup>30</sup> In adopting a closed reading of rhythm, I focus on dance elements that would lead to certain choreographic modernities as experienced by Klunchun and the Amrita dancers. I choose to concentrate on the transformative processes of performance rhythms in bodies rather than the transmission methods *between* bodies. For instance, the teaching and learning methods from choreographer to dancer – in the case studies of Klunchun and the NAFA students, and his company dancers – are not highlighted here. I acknowledge the complexities of pedagogic strategies and learning processes involved in the transmission of rhythm from one body to

way of breaking from their classical training by defamiliarising, varying familiar rhythms.

Deleuze stresses that elements of aesthetic and power representations must be removed in order for continuous creativity or affective modes of expression to emerge. The question arises if the element of rhythm observed in the case studies is truly free of aesthetic and power representations. As I have discussed, rhythm is an essential component of many classical Southeast Asian performance disciplines. Time-keeping for these art forms is a disciplinary tool that is supposed to strictly confine performance structures to their desired pace, as determined by past masters and historical convention. Classical rhythms are also not without its 'baggage' of cultural and aesthetic representation, and they possess certain kinds of as well as power. However, in the cases I have illustrated above, the process of the 'generative subtraction' merely exposes the operation of the rhythm element identified as a potential for variation and creativity. It is what happens to the rhythm in its processes of transformation or fluctuation that unleashes its potential of variation.

Southeast Asian classical performers observe a particular rhythm closely in their respective performances, but there is always space for the performer to adjust and even manoeuvre slight changes, just like their choreographies and performance texts mentioned above. The orchestra musicians in the Malay court dance of Joget, keep a close eye on the performers so they can adjust their music tempo according the pace of the performance. In Wayang Kulit, the *dalang* is the rhythm keeper of the performance, signaling the tempo for the gamelan with by knocking on a wooden box with a brass beater held between his (or sometimes her) toes. Musicians in the Javanese court dance Serimpi, and the Balinese ritualistic mask performance Topeng also take visual cues from their co-performers to adjust their tempo of playing, either slowing down or speeding up to support the active rhythms in the performing arena.

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another. These critical elements deserve entirely new paths of discussion and analysis that are however not within the scope of this chapter.

Khon performance consists of live action on stage by masked performers, underscored by an orchestra and singers. The narrative is sung by a lead backed by a chorus, while the performers on stage act or dance out the scenes. During Klunchun's classical repertoire rehearsals, the lead singer keeps time and rhythm with his song, and also cues the orchestra. On many occasions, the lead singer/conductor will adjust the rhythm of the scene to accommodate the live action on stage. I have also observed Cambodian classical performances where the lead singer/conductor adjusted the rhythm to speed up what was happening on stage. The counts may remain the same – counts of four, six or eight – but the speed can be varied. In a particular Khon repertoire rehearsal by Klunchun's company, I observed how a particular duet between two dancers 'dictated' the rhythm and pace of the musicians as they were slower in their movements than the music that was being played. The conductor used his bamboo clapper to signal to the musicians for a slightly slower tempo.

In the first scenario with Belle and Kethya, I have demonstrated that their rhythms are adjusted in relation to each other as the improvisation progresses. In the two cases of Klunchun with his NAFA students and his company dancers, the rhythm of the 'Krouw Nai' piece was hard to determine while its speed constantly modulated. It wasn't a case of the particular rhythms in all the scenarios operating singularly, but rather their fluctuating speeds (in Belle and Kethya's situation), and also how the rhythms reacted in relation to one another with different speeds of the performers' gestures and movements (as in the NAFA students and Klunchun's dancers). It is a matter of juxtapositioning the identified "minor" performance element to other elements that can potentially release "continuous variation" just as Deleuze qualifies with the relations of speeds in two operating variations and also the inter-play of the two elements that constantly undercut or influence each other (1997, 249-250).

In looking further afield – and to a wider perspective – in the examination of rhythms, there is Henri Lefebvre's seminal study of "rhythmanalysis" ([1992] 2004) to consider how rhythm can be used in the analysis of culture, society and the

impact of capitalism on the body. In his introduction to the book *Rhythmanalysis*, translator Stuart Elden writes that for Lefebvre rhythm is:

found in the workings of our towns and cities, in urban life and movement through space. Equally, in the collision of natural biological and social timescales, the rhythm provides a privileged insight into the question of everyday life.

(2004, viii)

As Lefebvre puts it: “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is *rhythm*” (2004, 15, emphasis original). While Lefebvre’s intention was to analyse the politics of everyday life by examining rhythm in general and not those specific to particular cultural performances, the fact is that performers and dancers do not exist solely in a vacuum on stage and during performance. They engage with everyday life just as much as they commit to highly concentrated activities or rehearsal, performance and performance-making. There are contrasting rhythms of everyday urban life in cities such as Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Singapore, which dancers inhabit, and where they carry out mundane as well as highly specialised activities such as their dances.

According to Lefebvre’s conception of “rhythmanalysis”, these dancers would have to negotiate their own dance rhythms with the external and constantly fluctuating rhythms of the developing city (modern technologies, vehicular traffic and concrete urban landscapes). Then there is the sociocultural rhythm of these dancers in their everyday life, in the form of cultural and social practices (worship in temples, religious festivals, and other social and cultural etiquette), which also has to contend with rapid changes – or rhythms – of modern progress. Moreover, each of these rhythm genres differ in themselves, from the varying rhythms of different dance forms, to the differentiated rhythms within cities. Constant urban development in Bangkok and Phnom Penh is introducing faster and more syncopated rhythms, which are also fragmented as they offset with slower sociocultural rhythms, into the everyday lives of the dancers. Conversely the young NAFA dance students in Singapore are familiar with an even more frenetic pace in the city-state that emphasises speed and efficiency. One cannot overlook the impact

of these external city and increasingly urban rhythms on dancers who are also primed to explore choreographies that are beyond their prescribed classical rhythms.

Increasingly frequent international travel to performing arts festivals, workshops and residencies, which entails encounters with the new rhythms of foreign cities, novel cultural and social practices, and the dance styles of guest choreographers, should also be taken into consideration. These contrasting and harmonising rhythms certainly have ramifications for the dancers culturally and socially, for their own artistic training, and even biological circadian rhythms. The impact of external rhythms that I have mentioned above will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. My main aim for now is to highlight that perhaps an all too 'obedient' and 'strict' application of Deleuze's concept of generative subtraction might inevitably 'amputate too much' and disregard external cultural and social factors which may further help us understand how contemporary choreography is created and performed by the dancers.

### **Discussion: Politics in Dance**

For most of this chapter I have focused on Deleuze's operation of 'generative subtraction' as a tool, to provide an alternative understanding to how dance experimentation stem from practical application of classical practices. There is however a further rationalisation of Deleuze's tenacious exercise in 'removal and exposure'. He contends that "continuous variation" of an exposed "minor" performance element in theatre leads to a "new potentiality". More importantly, this new form of theatre leads to "becoming-minority", rendering a political function for this art form ([1979] 1997, 251-256). He goes on to define minority in two ways. The first relates to groups excluded from the majority, which establishes what is considered the norm that is "a state of rule" (1997, 254). In the second definition, Deleuze contends that to become-minority:

... is a goal, a goal that concerns the entire world since the entire world is included in this goal, and in this becoming inasmuch as everyone creates his or her variation of the unity of despotic measure and escapes, from one side or the other, from the system



of power that is part of the majority. ... Minority here denotes a strength of a becoming while majority designates the power or weakness of a state, of a situation. Here is where theater or art can surge forward with a specific, political function.

([1979] 1997, 255)

Deleuze explains that theatre can now be political because of its “becoming minority” where elements of aesthetic representations and further representations of power have been removed and the “continuous variation” of immanent creativity exists. Whatever remains in the theatre can now creatively move away or in Deleuze’s term, “escape” ([1979] 1997, 255) from the powers or standards established and imposed by the majority. While he does qualify the minority in vague and encompassing terms that include “women, children, the South, the third world, etc” ([1979] 1997, 255), it is worth paying attention to Deleuze’s notion of a continuous line of creativity that frees the minority, the marginalised, the Othered, from hegemonic and direct dominant forces of the majority.

In the case of the Amrita dancers and Klunchun’s company, we can identify two kinds of dominant majorities at work on their artistic, socio-cultural, socio-economic persons and environments. The more direct powers of dominance come from their immediate milieu in the forms of local majority groups such as ruling royal elites, cultural and tourist ministries, state-driven cultural enforcements, wealthy patrons or potential corporate sponsors, to name a few. For example, the dancers must constantly negotiate state-sanctioned and royal cultural forms and practices. Both the Thai Khon and Cambodian Robam Kbach Boran and Lakhon Khaol are national cultural forms that are also supported and championed by the Thai and Cambodian aristocracy. State bodies such as cultural and tourist ministries ensure that these classical forms remain unchanged as a defining element of national identity for citizens, as well as a unique cultural attraction for foreign tourists. The UNESCO World Heritage Site Angkor Wat complex in Siem Reap is still the largest income earner for the country’s tourism industry. The number of visitors increases annually, and in 2013 it attracted over 2 million international visitors (‘Cambodia’s Angkor Wat’ 2013, [www.tourismcambodia.com](http://www.tourismcambodia.com)). Revenue from ticket sales at the

historic site amounted to US\$51 million in 2012 (Hor 2013, [www.phnompenh.com](http://www.phnompenh.com)), contributing to Cambodia's tourism industry status as second only to the garment manufacturing industry in generating national GDP.

The Cambodian court dance Robam Kbach Boran, also known as the Royal Cambodian Ballet, has received UNESCO's "Intangible Heritage Humanity" status as well. Along with Angkor Wat, the country's classical cultural practices are vigorously promoted as tourist attractions, what more with the endangerment of many Khmer classical forms due the Khmer Rouge regime. Income potential therefore leads to pressure not only to maintain these historical forms, but also to ensure they do not change. Foreign visitors expect Angkor Wat along with the classical dances to look a certain way because of how they are marketed and promoted in tourism brochures.

Royal elites too uphold and safeguard these art forms as a means of perpetuating symbols of imperial, historical and cultural power. In addition to the aesthetic element, the classical arts also constitute a form of body discipline that prescribes specific gendered, social and cultural behaviour for particular groups. The Robam Kbach Boran and the dancers do not only embody artistic and cultural power, but they imbue the Khmer kings with symbolic divine powers in order to rule over their subjects. So important is the classical dance and its association with the Cambodian royal monarchy, that the art form was considered a powerful political tool of communication in the national and international arenas from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1970s (Phim and Thompson 1999, 40-43).

More than that, an integral component of Cambodian classical performances is the "sacred nature of the teacher-student relationship" where the elaborate and solemn *sampeah kru* (Khmer: teacher blessing) ceremony is held before every performance (Phim and Thompson 1999, 46). Dancers recite prayers and present incense and other food and flower offerings to dance spirits, spirits of deceased dance masters, and their own dance masters (Ibid.). This reverence for and loyalty to classical arts and their masters became the subject in *Khmeropdies II*, in which Belle and Kethya were involved. Later in the scene where they 'play' and improvise with

their classical gestures and movements, they are interrupted by their female classical master, played by real-life master Sam Sathya, who discovers their irreverent behaviour. Sam chastises them for messing with the classical gestures, accusing them of having no respect for tradition. She goes on to lament about what other masters would think of them for their insolence, and more importantly, what other masters would think of Sam for not teaching her students the proper attitude towards classical Khmer performance.

One way to “escape” these restrictions would be for the dancers to create dances outside of their classical repertoire. Pichet Klunchun has in the past been sidelined and even vilified by his Khon peers and masters because his own traditional practices and training do not ‘conform’ to certain standards set by local authorities in Thailand. He spoke candidly about his relations to his Khon peers in Bangkok: “My dancers who are classically trained by me do not get accepted to perform in national Khon performances or command performances for the Thai queen. Other Khon masters say that my version of Khon is wrong and that I teach my dancers the wrong thing”. He also remarks that traditional Khon is treated merely as a national and cultural symbol, and that most masters demand utter obedience to the cultural form and never deviate from it. “The teachers say you must protect the culture, protect Khon ... you perform in front of the King ... and then when you finish [graduate], you become a teacher”.

In their dance experimentations, Klunchun and the Amrita dancers demonstrate their “becoming minority” through new expressions of their respective classical forms, which are comparatively free from the symbolic and cultural representations that the classical forms are traditionally bound to. The political potential of their “becoming-minority” manifests through their transgression and subversion of their classical forms away from the state-sponsored categorisations and associations of the art forms. As Deleuze points out, the “minority represents nothing regionalist, nor anything aristocratic, aesthetic, or mystical” ([1979] 1997, 255).

The well-travelled dancers discussed in this chapter are also subjected to other kinds of dominant forces, such as how they are viewed from a Western perspective. Orientalism is alive, in that western audiences may still view these dancers through exoticised lenses. For the Western audience Klunchun and the Amrita dancers may still be viewed as personifications of ancient, primeval, and even mystical Siamese or Khmer or Angkor cultural legacies, such that their experimental dance works are not accepted as 'original creations'. Or that their contemporary dances are viewed entirely as causal effects of an apocalyptic cultural hegemony such as the Cambodian Amrita dancers' contemporary efforts as a means to rise from the "ruins" of the Khmer Rouge genocide years.

### **Further Aesthetic and Political Considerations**

By scrutinising functional elements such as rhythm, attention is given to the creative specificities of making and practising innovative forms of dance. As I have demonstrated in the three case studies, by isolating the element of rhythm, with its functions and operations in particular situations, the 'inner workings' of contemporary dance can be presented, described and explained through practical means. This 'subtraction' exercise, however, risks oversimplifying the complex artistic, as well as practical functions of contemporary dance by pinning everything to the singular rhythm. The political implications of the new forms of expression seem to be limited to specific transgressions of hegemonies that are "regionalist ... aristocratic, aesthetic, or mystical", as described by Deleuze ([1979] 1997, 255). Deleuze's conception of these representations are identified above as reified forms that are associated with nationalist movements (the royal elites and state-sanctioned culture), tourism (popular traditional products for foreign tourists) and historical contexts (post-Khmer Rouge loss and recovery of Khmer culture). Additional social, cultural, political and economic considerations have to be taken into account in examining the organisational and aesthetic contexts of Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers' contemporary dance and their dancemaking processes. Even Gilles Deleuze, who takes great effort to extract and inspect the minutiae of his discourses, remains faithful to the larger picture or grand scheme of the rhizome. Together with Felix Guattari, he takes the view of thinking and studying ideas,

concepts, things, elements, objects in relation to one another in a spreading network of other ideas and things that influence one another in different ways to produce even more networks of relations (1987, 3-28).

The rehearsal sessions where Klunchun's, Belle's and Kethya's practical choreographic strategies emerge do not occur in a vacuum. When they enter the rehearsal studio, these dancers bring with them classical skills and experiences, sociocultural and socioeconomic habitus and other corporeal practices, socio-political agendas, personal artistic visions, and professional motivations acquired elsewhere. What are not apparent in the rehearsal studio are the interconnected layers and overlaps of learned cultural and social aspects that contributed initially to the entirety of their contemporary performance. Klunchun and the Amrita dancers constantly experience myriad artistic, political as well practical issues as they develop their choreographic practices in local as well as foreign environments. While this chapter focuses on a single non-representational aesthetic aspect of dance, the following three chapters incrementally re-introduce elements of the dancers' sociocultural and socio-political contexts along with the significance of traditional aesthetic representation as well as hegemonic powers that are present in their classical conventions. By doing this, wider and broader perspectives are taken into account in order to better understand the roles and functions played by classical practices in the dancers' development toward contemporary choreography.

Alternatively, traditional or classical cultural forms of Khon and Lakhon Kaol can be understood as acts of embodiment by the dancers rather than reified forms of historicised, nationalist or state-sanctioned cultures. The dancers encounter different and changing social, cultural, political and economic circumstances as they develop their contemporary dance practices. These external encounters and experiences influence how they express their cultural forms with different meanings and through different contexts away from traditional conventions. Klunchun, for instance, is carving an artistic niche for himself not only as director and choreographer of his company but also as an individual artist with a unique point of view in his home country. In modern Bangkok, Klunchun draws on his classical

knowledge and virtuosity to compete with other genres and types of dances in a globalised environment. To do this, he develops his unique approach to Khon that challenges and changes the conventional boundaries of the classical artform thereby producing new dances. Hence instead of perceiving cultural forms as fixed and rigid, we consider the dancers' contemporary social, cultural and political contexts that contribute to the development of their embodied traditional expressions. In the next chapter, classical gestures and characterisation come under scrutiny. The transformations of embodied cultural expressions are explored as I analyse aesthetic strategies undertaken by Klunchun and Cambodian dancer Phon Sopheap when they include classical gestures and character in their contemporary works.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**GESTURING TOWARDS IDENTITY – PART I:**  
**Of The Self**

**Introduction**

In contemporary dance there is only one true dance: the dance of each individual. ... Contemporary techniques, no matter how scientific, no matter how long it takes to acquire them, are before anything else the instruments of a knowledge leading the dancer to this singularity. The modern and contemporary dancer owes her theory, thought and vitality to her own forces.

Laurence Louppe, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*

... at the core of each style is the single artist's way of moving and feeling, fuelled by his or her vision of what dance means in the world and how the world reveals itself in dance.

Deborah Jowitt, *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*

The epigraphs above exhibit different ways of writing about the qualities of the contemporary dancer, but the element of individuality is strongly present in both. The authors above also allude to attributes or elements that constitute this individuality, which would enable the dancer or choreographer to move and create dance in a way that is unique. Louppe writes about these special attributes as “forces” that are exclusive to the dancer, but does not really elaborate on exactly what they are. Jowitt on the other hand writes of a “core” in the style(s) of how a particular dancer moves and feels but then also doesn't define what this “core” is made up of and how it operates or functions. These abstract and intangible – even romantic – terms certainly allow for different interpretations of what constitute special attributes to the individuality of a modern or contemporary dancer, especially in an ephemeral art form that, unlike ballet, for instance, is not governed by strict conventions.

If we were to follow the line of argument of the intangible qualities of individuality, then numerous styles produced by differing ‘unique individual’ dancers

are themselves considered, yet again, special. So, different ‘individualistic’ dancers produce ‘individualistic’ ways of moving that are all unique in their own way. The argument becomes tautological, limiting the philosophical and abstract approach to understanding the concept of individuality in dancers or choreographers. Dance may be an ephemeral phenomenon but it begins with material aspects of the dancer’s body and the way she wields them to express the art form. One way to examine traits of individuality is through the inspection of self-identity that has become one of the defining features of modernity (Giddens 1991). There is also an implicit relationship between the artistic identity and the self-identity where the unique traits of the dancer, for example, could contribute to her production of equally distinct ways of choreographic styles and vocabulary. Therefore, I situate the study of the self-identities of dancers in how they wield and transform learned choreographic vocabularies so that they stand apart in their experimentations among their dance peers or wider local and international dance communities.

In this chapter I examine how the dancer-choreographers Pichet Klunchun and Phon Sopheap experiment with classical forms in order to express their self-identities. The ways in which Klunchun and Phon employ their techniques, I argue, signal a modern – and modernising – way of dancing and choreographing, marked by a shift in the identity of the dancer from the collective, communal-driven milieu of classical training, to that of the individual, independent artist of contemporary dance. By close scrutiny of classical gestures in several dancemaking processes, I reveal how the emergence of a choreographic identity or style is consistent with the emergence of the self-identity of the dancer in performance. This is not to underplay the distinctions to be made in how these identities develop differently in the choreographer or dancemaker, and in the dancer or performer.

As a ‘default’ method of tracing how classical gestures ‘travel’ into more experimental works, I turn to Carrie Noland’s and Sally Ann Ness’s concept of “migrations of gesture” (2008). In their book of the same title, Noland and Ness discuss the capacity for embodied gestures to be transmitted through time, “supporting the survival of the past while potentially engendering meanings that



bear the past toward an unpredictable future” (2008, x), and to migrate through space (for example in the dance practices of diasporic communities). Such transformations can also move through different mediums (from writing to dance, graffiti to walking, memory to embodied practices), and therefore across various disciplines in the fields of history, politics, society and culture.

In the present chapter, I am most concerned with examining the transmission and transformation of gestures over time, through a succession of performances. Specifically, I am interested in how the classical gestures of Klunchun’s Khon and Phon’s Lakhon Kaol are redeployed in contemporary performances to generate expanded meanings and new expressions. As Noland puts it

gestures migrate (as well as disappear) and that in migrating they create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences. In a world of inescapable global circulation, gestures, too, undergo appropriation and enjoy afterlives that change their initial function.

(2008, x)

The gestures of Klunchun and the Amrita dancers transform over time while remaining with the same dancers: they tend not to ‘travel’ geographically to other sites or bodies in performance. In the first part of this chapter I trace a single classical hand gesture that is key to Klunchun’s performance of the self on stage. I then build on this to examine the changing relationship between the characterisation of the monkey in traditional Cambodian dance and Phon’s sense of self-identity.

### **From Bangkok to St Petersburg, and Back**

In 1900, the Bud Mahinot Dance Company from Thailand travelled through Russia and other parts of Europe, to perform Khon. Avant-garde ballet performer Vaslav Nijinsky witnessed the Thai performers and was inspired. In 1910, he premiered *La Danse Siamoise* at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. There is no film documentation of the performance. However, black and white photographs of the Russian dancer adopting various Khon-like poses in a costume bearing

similarities to those worn by members of the Bud Mahinot Dance Company, do still exist.

Exactly a century later, in 2010, Pichet Klunchun premiered *Nijinsky Siam* in Singapore. It was an exploration of Nijinsky's fascination with Khon and the creation of *Danse Siamoise*. In *Nijinsky Siam*, Klunchun staged the construction and reconstruction phases of the Russian dancer's performance. Using the photographic remains of Nijinsky in his 'Thai-ballet' poses, Klunchun and his dancers traced Nijinsky's dance and proposed how *Danse Siamoise* may have been created and performed. Audiences were taken through a research presentation, from the initial introduction of Nijinsky's poses in still pictures, through Klunchun and his dancers' imitations of those poses, to their attempts to 'animate' the images in movement phrases. The performance culminated in Klunchun appearance in a costume similar to Nijinsky's, performing a short solo based on what the Thai choreographer conceived as *Danse Siamoise*.

In examining the migration of gestures, there are two distinct elements that deserve scrutiny: first, the migratory routes or mappings of the gestures, and second, the gestural features themselves. In analysing migratory routes, two elements come into focus. Firstly, there is the gesture's trajectory or journey and the sites it inhabits, regardless of the sites' media. Secondly, there is the feature or type of the gesture that may transform, develop or remain unchanged when undergoing the traverse. Both these elements of trajectory and site, and gesture transformation, are observed in *Nijinsky Siam*.

One way of thinking about *Nijinsky Siam* is as an exploration of the migration of Khon gestures and movements from past dancers of the Bud Mahinot Dance Company who performed in St. Petersburg, to Nijinsky when he performed *La Danse Siamoise*. When Klunchun reconstructs Nijinsky's 'Thai-ballet', the Khon gestures continue to migrate to the final 'site' of Klunchun, as he performs the finale dance that depicts his version of Nijinsky's ballet, complete with a copy of the *Danse Siamoise* costume. This migratory route also extends across different media, from

the historical 'path' of the Khon travelling from the 1900 Bud Mahinot dancers to Nijinsky's own body in the 1910 *La Danse Siamoise*, to the photographs of Nijinsky, to the bodies of Klunchun and his dancers. The opening scene of *Nijinsky Siam* began with a stately procession of traditional large-scale Thai leather puppets, Nang Yai, carried by Klunchun's dancers. Instead of the usual Ramayana scenes carved onto the cowhide, they featured tableaux of Nijinsky in his *Danse Siamoise* poses.

The historical migratory route of the Khon art form exhibits complex and nuanced paths dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The classical dance drama of Khon has been associated with the shadow puppetry performance of Nang or Nang Yai. Puppeteers perform in full view of the audience while manipulating two-dimensional tableaux of scenes from the Ramayana (Brandon 1993, 237). Thai performance scholar Mattani Modjara Rutnin writes that the Khon and Nang Yai were considered "sister arts" that were usually performed together, with the Nang Yai shadow play either preceding the Khon performance, or coming after it (1993, 7). The assumption here is that the Nang Yai puppeteers eventually developed their own movements and gestures to perform three-dimensional embodied characters, as prototypes of Khon, and enacted scenes from the Ramayana. This path is further complicated as Khon has an intertwined history with the older Khmer or Cambodian Lakhon Kaol (Brandon 1993, 234). Khon and Lakon Khaol dance movements and gestures have cross-migrated over time since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, influencing one another's cultural and aesthetic practices as the two historically warring kingdoms exerted political power over each other (Brandon 1993, 237). Further historical tracing suggests that the movement and gestures of the Lakhon Kaol are linked to older dance forms in India (Phim and Thomson 1999, 9; Rutnin 1993, 6).

It is therefore possible to see striking parallels between the historical development of Khon, and the 'migrations' explored in Klunchun's *Nijinsky Siam*. The paths mapped out in the migratory routes of both are complex, and run in multiple directions. In its myriad visual presentations and re-presentations of two-dimensional and three-dimensional images, *Nijinsky Siam* represents a dense and nuanced thesis on the migration and mobility of Khon gestures from past to present.

Klunchun creates an intricate Khon ‘flow-chart’ that speaks of numerous aesthetic and creative possibilities in composing, constructing and reconstructing a historical Khon dance by juxtaposing photographic images, shadow puppet tableaux and physical gestures and movements and bodily poses.

In a later segment of the performance, however, he further complicates the study of Khon migration. Images of Thai Buddhist temple architecture featuring ornate curved gable apices and conical stupa rooftops are compared to similarly curved Khon hand gestures and the sharp, pointed headgear of the Khon dancer respectively. Hence, in addition to linking and mapping physical gestures and movements in images of dance and dancers across time, Klunchun also theorises and comments on the role of architectural art – and inevitably the implications of a holistic Thai cultural aesthetic practice – in the formation of Khon performance practice and aesthetics. His own theories on Khon, Thai architectural art, culture and aesthetic practices appear and re-appear in other works of his, which will be discussed in later sections. First, however, I would like to narrow in on a specific scene in *Nijinsky Siam* to analyse Klunchun’s development of a particular hand gesture, and subsequently examine how the features of this gesture change and develop beyond the conventions of Khon practice. In other words, I focus on how a gestural feature is transformed as it ‘travels’ from its historical classical conventions to more experimental performances.

### **Pointing to the Self**

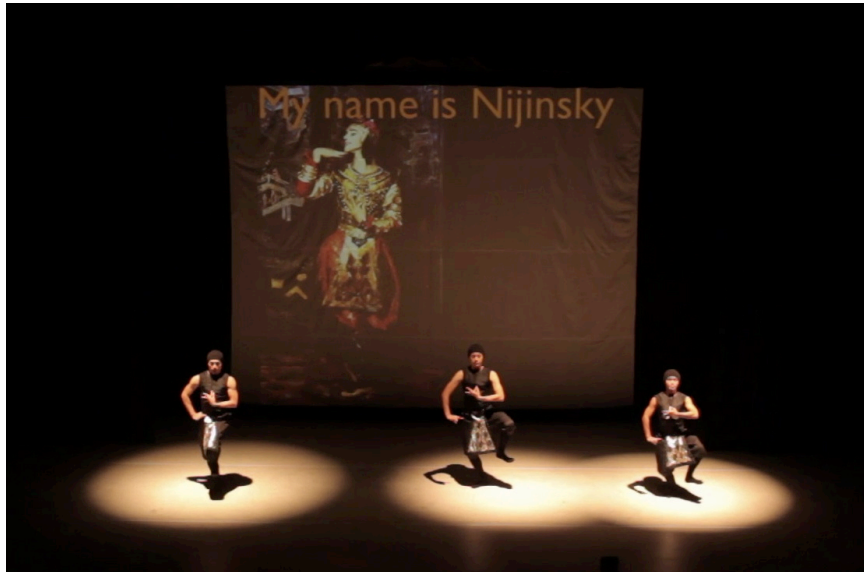
Carrie Noland states that embodied gestures pass through time “supporting the survival of the past while potentially engendering meanings that bear the past toward an unpredictable future” (2008, x). In the case of *Nijinsky Siam*, however, the future of the gesture and its ‘destination’ is not unpredictable at all. It is full of aesthetic and creative potential. The act of displaying, showing or presenting is one of the defining features in theatrical or dance performances, but the element of presence holds special significance in the performance. In the expositional scene at the beginning of the performance, Klunchun and his two dancers present themselves, signalling a critical act involving a specific gesture. They stand mid-stage

in single-file, facing the audience. One by one they introduce themselves verbally: “I am Padung”, “I am Sunon” and finally, “I am Pichet”. Nijinsky is also included in the scene with his portrait projected onto a white screen. The text “My name is Nijinsky” is superimposed onto his portrait.

The dancers’ verbal introductions are accompanied by a Khon hand gesture, the *jeeb*, where the thumb and index finger touch while the other fingers are arched and fanned out. In this particular scene the touching tips of the thumb and index finger form an apex that point at the dancers’ chests, with the wrists folded toward the arms (Figures 3.1, 3.2 & 3.3). Together with their self-introductions, the dancers use the *jeeb* to physically indicate who they are: “I am Padung”, “I am Sunon”, “I am Pichet”. Their speech is addressed to the audience. On the other hand, the *jeeb* points at their chests, their personages, themselves, drawing the audience’s attention to the dancers, and reinforcing the fact that they are indeed “Padung”, “Sunon” and “Pichet”, separate and distinct from each other.



**Figure 3.1: Screen capture of dancers Sunon (left) and Padung with their respective *jeeb* in *Nijinsky Siam***



**Figure 3.2: Screen capture of Klunchun with dancers in *jeeb* poses in *Nijinsky Siam*. Note the video projection of Nijinsky also in a *jeeb* pose**

Referring to theories conceived by Condillac and Husserl, Carrie Noland notes that gestures “are closest to natural expression and therefore indexical to the presence and intentionality of an individual human subject” (2008, xi). The gesture of pointing is one such example: Klunchun and his dancers establish their intentional indexical presences on stage, presenting their ‘selves’ to the audience. In Khon, different characters, such as Rama and Hanuman, are clearly distinguished by unique signifiers including special gestures and movement, costumes and masks. The act of pointing at one’s character to establish its indexical presence is not the norm in Khon. In *Nijinsky Siam*, character and performer are distinguished by different acts of presenting or displaying. The pointing *jeeb* signals the dancers’ indexical presence. This is then followed by the presentation of the dancers’ characters as they perform their Khon roles in movement. Dancer Padung starts with the Hanuman role by executing specific monkey movements and gestures, Sunon performs the demon gestures and Klunchun ends with his heroine or Sita role.<sup>31</sup> The neurologist and philosopher Raymond Tallis remarks that the gesture, “far from being a mere consequence of the body-engaged-in-action, can be used to signify itself – the body,

<sup>31</sup> The 2010 premier of *Nijinsky Siam* in Singapore only had Klunchun and his dancers presenting or demonstrating their specific roles of heroine, monkey and demon through movements and gestures. Subsequent productions in other festivals had Klunchun added the spoken words of “Female”, “Monkey” and “Demon” alongside the gestural presentations.

the action, the body-in-action – and then something more than itself” (2003, 75). When the dancers’ *jeebs* point directly *at* themselves, they reference the presences of their bodies, their actions, their bodies-in-action. More than that, the *jeeb* also points *out* the dancers as individuals with all the intrinsic and extrinsic traits unique to each dancer: “Padung” is separate and different from “Sunon”, who are also separate and different from “Pichet”.

On the specific subject of pointing, Tallis also writes that an invisible line leads our vision from the pointing instrument to the object pointed at. This “notional line” throws the object pointed at into sharp relief: our attention is focused on the object and its peripheries become secondary (2011, 12-13). According to Tallis, a relationship develops between the person who points and the object pointed at: “I make myself [the one pointing] stand out, along with the relationship of the one to the other [the object pointed at]. The object and I are italicized, usually for the benefit of the third party” (2011, 28). In pointing to themselves while uttering “I am Padung”, “I am Sunon” and “I am Pichet” respectively, the dancers chose an “italicized” manner of drawing attention to themselves as individual dancers. The subsequent presentations of the characters are achieved by a ‘softer’ method of performing the relevant gestures. In classical conventions, Khon performers come onstage fully masked and costumed to present their characters.<sup>32</sup> In a departure from this convention, Klunchun and his dancers in *Nijinsky Siam* literally gesture to the audience their self-identities: “It is me, Pichet, a Khon dancer who is performing the role of the heroine before you, the audience”. There are two arguments to be made for the significance of the dancers pointing at themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Human characters such as the hero Rama and the heroine Sita do not don masks while magical characters such as Hanuman or monkey roles and/or demon roles will have specifically designed full-headed masks. Either way, other visual signifiers such as costumes assist the audience in quick and easy identification of the roles on stage other than distinctive physical gestures and movements.



**Figure 3.3: Screen capture of *Nijinsky Siam* on Klunchun close up holding the *jeeb***

Firstly, there is the *jeeb* gesture utilised as a pointing instrument. Traditionally, the *jeeb* does not have a specifically assigned meaning in the Khon lexicon. Instead, it constitutes a free-floating sign used by dancers in a number of ways. Among other meanings, it can signify the first person “I” or “me” during performance when pointing to character’s (fictive) self. Since Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Ravana are readily identifiable, the pronoun “I” or “me” evoked by the characters merely state the first person present in the performance – the character in action. In *Nijinsky Siam*, the *jeeb* for Klunchun and his dancers becomes not just a simple indexical signifier but an active verb, to be – “I am...” – that reinforces the dancers as individuals, stronger than the just the first person pronoun “I”. Hence, the *jeeb* is reassigned with another creative meaning in this instance.

Secondly, the *jeeb* with its new function, also follows a new action to reinforce the active “I am” ending with “... Padung”, “... Sunon”, or “... Pichet”. This new action begins with the *jeeb*, which creates a looped route from the hand making contact with the chest, travelling through the body into the shoulder, down the arm and the hand, and back to the tip of the fingers, which is the *jeeb*. Visually, one could surmise that when Tallis remarks on the gesture being “more than itself”, the



dancers' new action with the *jeeb* not only reiterates the dancers as independent producers of the new creative meaning of the Khon gesture, but that this creativity begins and ends with the dancers. The reassigned *jeeb* in this particular scene, which materialises the dancers' first person presence, differentiates Klunchun's experimental performances from the classical repertoire. The *jeeb* now signals an emergent self-identity in the process of the performance that is not present in classical conventions.

In *Identity in Asian Literature*, Lisbeth Littrup writes of the influence of early oral and performance traditions on shaping a common cultural identity in the region of Southeast Asia (2001, 1). She states that mythical epics from India, such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, travelled to Southeast Asia along with the spread of the Hindu religion. Littrup continues that these epics were then conveyed and transmitted through different cultural forms, from storytelling to shadow puppetry (such as the Malay Wayang Kulit and the Thai Nang Yai). I will add that classical art forms such as Khon, Lakhon Kaol and Robam Kbach Boran in fact owe almost their entire performance narratives to the Ramayana epic. More than shaping a cultural identity, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana epics also impart ideal moral and social behaviours to the communities where they are recounted or performed, through the actions and events of their respective characters. As stated by Phim and Thompson in Cambodian examples, most classical performances communicate “[s]tereotyped ideals of social behavior” (1999, 37).

In the case of Ramayana, the trials and tribulations of the hero Rama and heroine Sita become exemplars of the ideal male and female figures, with all the correct personality traits of a life lived appropriately. For instance, Rama's heroics in his many battles against evil beings, and Sita's uncompromised feminine chastity, become qualities to be emulated by the community at large. Furthermore, supporting characters such as the monkey king Hanuman symbolise the qualities of loyalty and brotherhood in assisting Rama in his battles against evil. The Ramayana also stresses the community, exemplified by the solidarity and support of Hanuman and his troop of monkeys in their fight against Ravana, the demon king, and his

demon minions. The stress on dutiful communal loyalty and obeisance to a figure of authority as a central trope in the Ramayana stories, has implications in the development of social and cultural formations and practices in Thai and Cambodian communities. The influence of religious teachings on the shaping of identity is even stronger since substantial majorities in Thai and Cambodian society adhere to Buddhist practices.

Steven Collins explains that Theravadic Buddhism – a particular school of thought practised by the majority of Thai and Cambodian Buddhists – takes the view of the self as the first of “Ten Fetters” or shackles: delusions in life that prevent one from attaining enlightenment. Collins continues that the self then has to be “refuted” or negated in Buddhist teaching, which is called *anattā* or the “not self” (1982, 93-94).<sup>33</sup> Collins further explains that the Buddhist fetter of the self relates to the qualities of pride and conceit of the “unenlightened man” [*sic*] who believes that everything begins and ends with his being (1982, 94). The gradual process of eliminating conceit in the person is an act of “psychological ‘realisation’ of *anattā*” (1982, 94), of the “not self”, which can be understood as the emergence of self-awareness, the ability to be sensitive to one’s environment through introspection. Read against Klunchun’s gestural manifestation of “I am...” in *Nijinsky Siam*, the dancer’s actions seem to run counter to this tenet. Alternatively, Klunchun’s *jeeb* could be read as the emergence of a self-awareness that leads to the primacy of the individual who is sensitive to his surrounding environment.

In addition to this discussion of the self in relation to Buddhist teachings – though Klunchun has said that he is a devout Buddhist – there are yet many social and cultural considerations that intersect with an individual’s personal development in the idea of self as opposed to the community or collective. Numerous traditional and patriarchal sociocultural practices and norms (from morality tales such as the

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<sup>33</sup> The arguments for a “not self” here has been summarised to provide specific context for a particular performance analysis pertaining to Klunchun. Other than negative qualities of pride and conceit in the formation of the self, Collins suggests other factors, such as lack of control in the self, that necessitate the eradication of the “self” in Buddhism. For more information, see his chapter ‘The Denial of the Self as Right View’ (1982, 87-115).

Ramayana to accepted social customs in rural communal situations) that are reinforced with Buddhist teachings, could explain the reason behind the importance of the community over the self in societies such as the Thais and the Cambodians. The analysis of the self with regards to Buddhist teachings just highlights the complexity of the issue of self-identity that may be constituted by a number of social, cultural, political and religious influences.

To complicate matters further, the emergence and the development of the self, the individual, in Thai and Cambodian identities must be considered against an international historical backdrop, and with ever increasing global modernising factors such as international commerce and trade, electronic technologies, and the mobilisation of labour flows. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that the self-identity project in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries – what he terms as the period of “high or late modernity” – is as much connected to the influences of globalisation as it is driven by personal motivation. Inevitably, Giddens was writing of a “high or late modernity” that is symptomatic of Western countries. As I have already noted, there are sociocultural and religious dimensions in Southeast Asia that impact the development of the self differently. In the following sections, I examine these complexities with reference to Klunchun’s emergence as an individual artist.

### **The Emergent Self**

The presentation and ‘presencing’ of Klunchun do not only take place in *Nijinsky Siam*. His previous performances have invariably exhibited autobiographical aspects, including social, cultural and aesthetic details of his craft, recollections of his training, and reflections on his experience as a Khon artist in contemporary Thailand. In a classical practice and culture that stresses the importance of community and the collective, Klunchun’s prominent self-positioning as an individual artist has cumulative significance in his choreographic development away from classical conventions, as we will observe later.

*Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2005), *I am Demon* (2006) and *About Khon* (2007) comprised autobiographical elements that could be described as variations on the performance of “I am...”. In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2005) he demonstrated his specialist demon role, and spoke of the classical form as an exotic tourist attraction that is divorced from local cultural awareness. The performance also featured contemporary choreographer Jérôme Bel who engaged Klunchun in dialogue regarding their aesthetic practices. The title places Klunchun in the third person with “Pichet Klunchun” and places Bel in first person with “Myself”, but the audience becomes privy to Klunchun in his expositions on his artistic practices and as a Thai contemporary choreographer. Klunchun asserts his personal identity, otherwise the audience would not have ‘noticed’ Klunchun the dancer in typical Khon performances but rather the demon character he performs.

Klunchun continued on the personal route with *I Am Demon* (2006) in which the audience witnessed part of his rigorous training as a Khon demon dancer. Klunchun ‘performed’ his routine training as a demon dancer alongside video testimonies by his late Khon teacher on the makings of a good demon dancer. This time, Klunchun took on the first person addressing the audience; what was important was Klunchun’s specific ways of performing the demon, not those of a generic Khon performer. In *About Khon* (2007), a variation on *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Jérôme Bel again played interviewer while Klunchun expounded his theories of Khon choreography as arising from Buddhist teachings and Thai architecture. As mentioned earlier, *Nijinsky Siam* also included a small but significant segment where Thai Buddhist architectural features are linked to aesthetic elements of Khon. *About Khon* ended with a conventional Khon sequence in full costumes and masks. The audience could not distinguish other individual dancers underneath their costumes and masks but Klunchun was always ‘present’ as he performed his Khon without traditional costuming or mask.

Throughout these performances, Klunchun explicitly presents his person and body as a vehicle for Khon practice, aesthetics, culture and history. These recurring tropes of the dancer-choreographer speaking as an individual artist have important

implications for Klunchun's breaking away from the socio-cultural norms of traditional performance, where individuality is frowned upon. Khon and Lakhon Kaol performances and cultural practices stress collective characteristics from the early training of the cohort of young students and the communal aspects of performance where dancers and musicians working together, to the stable and familiar repertoire of narratives from the Ramayana. This collective sensibility can be traced to the larger Thai religious and socio-cultural practices where family and community are placed before the self.

These conditions encourage stable communities of performers and artists while ensuring repeatability of the same performances and standardisation in their quality. Their specialised roles in male, female, monkey or demon characters also mean that they do not deviate much from the classical repertoire, the stories vary in performances but the characters remain the same. Although there are cases of celebrated individuals who are valued for their portrayal of their ascribed character, performance usually entails concealment of one's self in order to draw attention to fictive characters, and to serve the characters to their highest performative and virtuosic potential. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself, I Am Demon, About Khon* and *Nijinsky Siam* exhibit the emerging identity of an individualistic and independent artist in Klunchun who determines his own artistic practice and more importantly who nurtures and exhibits his own creative potential.

Giddens writes that self-identity is "*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*". Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (1991, 53. Emphasis in original). When examined in the light of Giddens's statement, Pichet's recent oeuvre can be said to radiate different biographic fragments of who he is. The four performances consecutively reflect Klunchun's progressive biographic development across different performance times and spaces. The reflexive interpretation of himself reaches a summit when he creatively applies the *jeeb* to the act of pointing at himself in *Nijinsky Siam*.

It would, however, be an oversimplification to assume that Klunchun reaches the very height of his performance of the self in *Nijinsky Siam* and in no other subsequent choreographies after that. What can be said is that the four performances discussed above can be understood as a focused process of consolidating the fundamentals of Klunchun's individuality as an artist, as opposed to the larger and more complex context of personhood. Giddens explains that there is a conflict between the unified and fragmented self in the individual when confronted with the equally fragmented aspects of modernity that extend beyond the local. As Giddens puts it, "[i]n many modern settings, individuals are caught up in a variety of differing encounters and milieux, each of which may call for different forms of 'appropriate' behaviour" (1991, 190). He then qualifies that this fragmentation of the self is not necessarily a negative feature, as different situations go into creating a distinctive self-identity with a certain integration of the many roles played by the individual, which are then recuperated into the self. Klunchun's varied social, cultural and performative encounters in and beyond performances such as *Pichet Klunchun and Myself, I Am Demon, About Khon* and *Nijinsky Siam* result from embracing new aesthetics as the basis for interactions with other performers such as Bel, and with diverse local and international audiences. These performances can be perceived as a gradually integrating of the many aspects of Klunchun as the individual artist.

In examining the body and the self, Giddens also writes: "Regularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained; yet at the same time the self is also more or less constantly 'on display' to others in terms of its embodiment" (1991, 58). The body discipline and aesthetics of Khon form a large part of Klunchun's life and biography. Hence Khon gestures and movements then constitute a substantial means for Klunchun not only to maintain and display his artistic expressions, but in their transformations, to reveal the modern aspect of self-identity on stage. The classical *jeeb* gesture is transformed into a modernising agent.

## Signature and Signature Practice as the Choreographer's Identity

In a dense but illuminating presentation on choreographer Rosemary Butcher and her work entitled 'Rosemary Butcher: Jottings on Signature in the Presence of the Artist' (2009), Susan Melrose suggests analysing the performances of an artist by way of their "signature". Melrose describes "signature" and the relationship to "signature practice" using the example of the artistic practice of painting:

signature can be recognised in, for example, brushstrokes ... 'signature practices', actualised in the painting, are dispersed across the work, and they refer us back not so much to the painterly theme or subject, but rather to the painting as recording *a way of working* that is specific to a particular artist.

(2009, [www.sfmelrose.org.uk](http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk))

Melrose is also sensitive to how the term 'signature' in theoretical writing is perceived and critiqued, as "a set of constraints to be broken out of" only to have the so-called unique signature become repetitive, which contradicts its first purpose of sole originality (2009, [www.sfmelrose.org.uk](http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk)). With reference to dance or performance terms, an issue with "signature" and "signature practice" could be the danger of unique choreography and choreographic method(s) that risk becoming 'default modes' of creating and moving, so that the exceptional soon becomes commonplace and normal. Melrose then addresses the paradoxical trait of combining originality and repeatability by introducing the "sensibility" of the artist or choreographer. She likens this ever-evolving "sensibility" to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* which is constituted by "a cluster of tendencies, attitude, ethos and a sense of possibility that is durably installed in the artist from her or his early years" (2009, [www.sfmelrose.org.uk](http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk)). This "sensibility", she continues, is developed through time.

Following Melrose's arguments, Klunchun's signature practice would then be *how* the choreographer uses Khon gestures and movements in his performances, his "way of working" with Khon. His sensibilities would then be partly nurtured by the recurring themes and motifs of his works across time, including: the continual presence of Khon training and vocabulary in his performances; his fascination with history and future of the form; his own theorisation of Khon aesthetics and

practices; and his experimentation with Khon. As Klunchun's sensibility in his performance-making grows, his signature practice of what he does with Khon also shifts and changes according to separate performances he creates.

Thus Klunchun's sensibility in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself, I Am Demon, About Khon* and *Nijinsky Siam* is the positing of Klunchun in first person. The singularity of Klunchun's contemporary practice for these particular performances come from a combination of his signature of Khon gestures, his signature practice of the unique way he uses his Khon practice, and also perhaps the urgent need to differentiate himself from other classical Khon choreographers in his community. Nevertheless, once his identity as a singular choreographer has been established in *Nijinsky Siam*, Klunchun sustains his choreographer identity in his subsequent performances with changing sensibilities. Aside from constant experimentation with Khon, Klunchun is also concerned with the development of his dance company, and the artistic development of its members. Klunchun has remarked that he has a vision for all dancers in his Pichet Klunchun Dance Company not only to perform in experimental Khon dances, but also to be able to create them.

Klunchun's choreography of *Black and White* (2011), which followed *Nijinsky Siam*, still utilised Khon, but this time his signature practice changed through an exploration of Khon vocabulary in contact-improvisational tableaux. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In summary, however, his sensibility here informed a development of Khon movements beyond the classical lexicon while examining the theme of balance between good and evil. Wearing a mask for the entire duration of the performance, Klunchun was not as prominent in *Black and White* as in his previous productions. Instead, the company dancers became the main focus. During one of the rehearsals I observed, 'Pichet Klunchun the dancer' was not signalled at all, and Klunchun danced as the demon character throughout. Yet the combination of his signature, signature practice and a different sensibility produced a singularity that can only be attributed and credited to Pichet Klunchun as the choreographer.



Two observations can be made from the situation above. One, Klunchun's artistic singularity is ever-present in *Black and White* because of his distinct use of Khon vocabulary. Two, this artistic singularity is now expressed through his company of dancers, whose bodies bear his signature and signature practices. The singularity of Klunchun's art, which is an integral constitution of his individuality as an artist, is now extended to and in his dancers. While Melrose addresses the idea of signature and signature practice *within* a particular choreographer (2009, [www.sfmelrose.org.uk](http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk)), these concepts are not extended to the choreographer working with other dancers. Perhaps Melrose's intention is to emphasise that it is individual *signatures* and *signature practices* specifically that are transferable from a particular choreographer onto the bodies of other dancers, and not the singularity of the artist. Other dancers may express Klunchun's signatures and signature practices but his artistic singularity is entirely his own as a result of diverse personal and social factors that make up his individuality; it is what constitutes his artistic identity. To extend this line of argument, Klunchun's company dancers then have the potential to develop their own individual artistic singularities as they may start with Klunchun's signatures and signature practices but move away to develop their own signatures that are influenced by their own sensibilities.

A final point about the importance of signature and signature practices to Klunchun can be noted with reference to the interpretation of *Nijinsky Siam*. Critics were quick to describe the performance as a postcolonial critique of cultural and aesthetic appropriation and an active reclamation of the Thai Khon from the West *vis à vis* Nijinsky's *Danse Siamoise*. Singapore-based arts writer Mayo Martin started his review with the title 'Pichet Klunchun TKOs Vaslav Nijinsky!' (2010), thereby implying a 'showdown' between the Thai choreographer and Russian ballet dancer. Taking on the tone of a boxing match commentator in his article, Mayo wrote that Klunchun "brilliantly proceeds to give the ghost of Nijinsky and all he stands for a good whipping". In a similar vein, Thai arts critic Pawit Mahasarinand also felt that *Nijinsky Siam* was politically charged, proclaiming that the performance "is no tribute", and that "Pichet was making a comment about colonialism with his investigation into the Russian's inventiveness 100 years ago" (2010).

In the finale of *Nijinsky Siam*, Klunchun appeared dressed in a costume similar to Nijinsky's in *Danse Siamoise* and presented his own version of Nijinsky's performance. Klunchun also 'reverted' back to traditional Thai music in place of the Christian Sinding composition for the original *Danse Siamoise*. A 'conversation' was also projected onto the screen where Klunchun says to Nijinsky: "I think I know your secrets, Monsieur Nijinsky", followed by "I am Pichet Klunchun". Both Martin and Mahasarinand read this scene as a final act of reclamation, where Klunchun returned cultural and aesthetic ownership to the original heir – the Thais and Klunchun in particular. Neither critic was convinced that *Nijinsky Siam* was merely a research exercise into the migration of Khon, even though Klunchun states in his programme notes:

I desired a dialogue with Nijinsky ... Why Nijinsky adopted exotic gestures is not my point of interest; but rather how he achieved it. ... The more I work with Nijinsky's choreography in *Danse Siamoise*, the more I have acknowledged and learned surprising fact [*sic*] from him. Nijinsky saw the beauty of Thai Classical Dance and developed that beauty to become his own perfect beauty. I believe that looking at Thai Classical Dance from the outsider's point of view allowed him to see the side that was impossible to be seen for the insider.

(Klunchun 2010)

Writing on contemporary Indonesian dance, dance scholar Sal Murgiyanto suggests that the method of creating dance becomes the focus of the contemporary choreographer where "[contemporary] dance practice and choreography, then become forms of research – of practice as research, even if not in the formal sense of the term – in which there is a dialogue for the traditional" ([2009] 20012, 207). I believe that Klunchun's dance practice embodies Murgiyanto's notion of research in his works, in that his constant research into all aspects of Khon contributes a large part of his artistic sensibility that in turn shapes and influences his signature and signature practices.

In my reading, when Klunchun said "I think I know your secrets, Monsieur Nijinsky" at the end of *Nijinsky Siam*, the choreographer was not alluding to a means

of reclaiming the Khon from Nijinsky's appropriation. In my reading, Klunchun related to Nijinsky's fascination with Khon and also the Russian dancer's spirit of intellectual and artistic inquiry. If anything, *Nijinsky Siam* is the very materialisation of Klunchun's practice research into Khon, as perhaps the same way *Danse Siamoise* was for Nijinsky's fascination with Khon. Not only is the audience made aware of Pichet Klunchun the choreographer with all his singularities in his signature, signature practices and his sensibilities, but they also are privy to an emergent choreographic practice that is unique to a distinct artistic identity.

### **From Gesture to Character**

Khon and Lakhon Kaol gestures are seldom utilised in isolation; different gestures are arranged to form a cohesive flow of movements and actions on stage. More than that, different series or sets of gestures are associated with specific roles: the male human or Hero (Phra Ram in Khon, Rama in Lakhon Kaol); the female human or Heroine (Neang Sida in Khon, Sita in Lakhon Kaol); monkey (Hanuman in both) and demon or giant (Thotsakan in Khon, Ravana in Lakhon Kaol). Continuing with the investigation of the relationship between emergent identities and performance practices, I now turn to classical characterisation. Specifically, I examine the classical Lakhon Kaol monkey characterisation in choreographic experimentations by the dancers of Amrita Performing Arts group. I focus on male dancer Phon Sopheap, an accomplished monkey-role dancer, who has also been garnering experience in contemporary dance since 2005. The following sections are distinguished from earlier analyses where Phon's individual artistic identity is born out of, and further developed, through his embedded classical character.

Phon Sopheap began training in the monkey at the age of ten, and has since carved an illustrious career in the form. He has mastered all three monkey roles in Lakhon Kaol: the Battambang, court (or Hanuman) and the low-ranking soldier. Born in 1981 the 'monkey master' also teaches the role at the National School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. In 2005, Phon participated in what Amrita considers as its first attempt at contemporary dance (Amrita Performing Arts

2009), *Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants*. Cambodian and Thai dancers workshopped with Lakhon Kaol and Khon monkey and demon/giant movements to produce an updated version of a traditional Ramayana scene. Incidentally, this project was a collaboration between the Cambodian male monkey dancers and Pichet Klunchun.<sup>34</sup> Since *Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants*, Phon has participated in six other performances by foreign choreographers invited by Amrita to develop dance outside the classical Cambodian form. Most of these performances see Phon using different aspects of his monkey training to innovate and develop new vocabulary.

His relationship with the classical monkey role is therefore a layered one. He talks of being a “dancer-monkey” instead of a monkey dancer in his classical performances of the Ramayana: “When I perform classical, I am monkey, I am Hanuman.” We can take this to mean that he immerses himself in the character of the monkey king Hanuman with the full regalia of costume and mask. On the other hand, when Phon performs contemporary dances, he considers himself “Sopheap-[the]-dancer”. “When I perform contemporary dance I am Sopheap using classical monkey movements,” he elaborates (Phon 2013).<sup>35</sup> This can be read as the dancer Sopheap executing classical monkey vocabulary without characterisation, or the classical costume and mask that make up an integral part of the Hanuman character. So, it is a case of performing a character in “dancer-monkey” as opposed to executing monkey movements in “Sopheap-dancer”.

These two sides of “dancer-monkey” and “Sopheap-dancer” in Phon suggest fragmentary identities of self that ebb and flow according to different performance conditions and contexts. While Phon may verbalise an apparently clear separation between the roles or identities he performs, these identities prove to be more fluid when viewed on stage. For example, in *Khmeropedies I & II* (2009), Phon had a small scene where he described and demonstrated the challenges of training in the monkey role by comparison with his female

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<sup>34</sup> This particular production will be discussed and examined in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>35</sup> Phon Sopheap, interview with author, Phnom Penh, 2013.

colleagues' training. Phon laments the "hard work and much effort" that goes into his rigorously physical training, and complains of his female colleagues' "easy life" of playing heroines and the ethereal spirits of the Apsara. They execute slow and graceful movements with hyperextended upper limbs and delicate steps, in comparison to Phon's physically-demanding and energy-sapping somersaults, low and high jumps, and rolls of the agile and quicksilver monkey.

Here, Phon is obviously "Sopheap-dancer" rather than "dancer-monkey". However, the proceeding scene illustrates that this clear delineation can be muddled. Immediately following his monkey demonstration, Phon performs a trio with female co-dancers Sodhachivy Chumvan (Belle) and Chankethya Chey (Kethya) followed by a duet with Kethya. All three dance with classical dance vocabulary. Traditionally, the poses and movements of the Apsara dance exhibits more human shapes and forms that are upright in posture. On the other hand, the classical monkey takes on postures and movements of natural monkeys with lower centre of gravity, lumbering lower limb gaits and articulated upper limbs. Hence the overall imagery of the trio and duet is a dance between a monkey and humans.

Based on Phon's earlier statement, one would assume that the dancer is "Sopheap-dancer" performing using monkey movements while retaining mostly human traits in the trio/duet scene. On closer examination, there are inconsistencies in Phon's clear-cut "Sopheap-dancer" role. There are numerous times when Phon's facial expressions are decidedly simian in stylisation. His facial expressions betray wide grins, with pouting and puckering lips, and expressive brow movements. The classical monkey is performed with a full-headed mask. In this segment, Phon need not have 'performed' monkey in his facial expressions if he was indeed dancing as the 'humanly' "Sopheap-dancer". The fact that he did indicates that there is a certain 'slippage' of roles where Phon's "dancer-monkey" overlaps with "Sopheap-dancer".

## Monkey Modernity

*Khmeropedies I & II* choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon had remarked in the past that she originally wanted a trio or duet performed by dancers as humans consisting of man and woman/women but felt that Phon's classical monkey movements, physicality and character persisted in the scene.

The task in the *Khmeropedies* series [I, II and III] was to use classical Cambodian movement but to obtain different results in performance. ... I did not tell Sopheap to specifically use his monkey movements, but he had a very hard time at rehearsal taking the monkey out of him and kept bouncing back to that at every chance. So I gave up and encouraged them to be what they tend to be the most comfortable ... the monkey dancer [Phon] wanting to dance with the Apsara [Belle and Kethya].

(Phuon 2013)<sup>36</sup>

Even if it didn't go as planned by Phuon, the trio/duet segment is not a failure by any means. In fact, the duet possessed some charming moments as the often comical and sometime boorish monkey in Phon tried to 'woo' the "demure" yet playful and coquettish Apsara in Kethya. What is most striking for those familiar with the Lakhon Kaol tradition is that the characters of the celestial Apsara and the monkey or Hanuman appear in the same scene. In traditional Khmer mythology, these otherworldly beings exist in separate and distinct tales. The Apsara nymphs or spirits 'predate' Hanuman, as they first appear in Hindu creation myths when the supreme god Vishnu churned a sea of milk to create the world. The character Hanuman only appears much later in the Ramayana stories with the hero Rama, who is recognised as the seventh avatar of Vishnu. Another innovative aspect of the duet was the frequent body contact between male and female dancers, which marked a significant departure from the conventions of gender separation in classical Cambodian forms. The Hanuman dance in the Lakhon Kaol Reamker is an all-male art form, while Kethya's dancing heroine Sita belongs to the all-female court dance form Robam Kbach Boran. In other words, there are

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<sup>36</sup> Phuon, Emmanuèle. Email correspondence with author, 14 March 2013.

certain innovations in Phon's choreography that Phuon herself might have overlooked.

Susan Stanford Friedman argues that the relationship between tradition and modernity is a complex one: "Buried within the radical ruptures from the past are hidden continuities – all the things that refuse to change or cannot change, often having to do with the uneven distributions of power and violent histories." These are often seen as postcolonial social, political and cultural after-effects. She furthers this argument by disavowing the "misleading argument" of the "West as modern and the Rest as traditional" and calls for an examination of "the interplay of modernity and tradition within each location". She looks to Gaonkar, who states that "modernity always unfolds within a specific culture or civilizational context" and also lists a number of cultural theorists who offer terms such as "multiple modernities", "alternate modernities", "polycentric modernities" to describe this phenomenon (2006, 434). Postcolonial and post-genocide present-day Cambodia, with its aggressive socio-economic development and its struggle to preserve its cultural heritage, typifies Friedman's call for a study of the located "interplay" of modernity and tradition.

The "different results" choreographer Phuon hoped for may then be perceived with some measure of success – albeit, from her point of view, inadvertent – in experimentation. Dancers Kethya, Belle and Phon unwittingly capitalised on their "hidden continuities" to create "radical ruptures" within Cambodian cultural practices. *Khmeropedies I & II* is situated in its specific Cambodian contexts on two levels. On one level the performance exhibits classical dance movements infused with other (Western) dance practices of body contact and the mixing of characters from different classical narratives. On the second level, there is the over-arching narrative in the entire *Khmeropedies I & II*, which explored themes of tradition and modernity. The traditional Cambodian dancers negotiate their classical training and their teacher-student relationships with the rapid influx of foreign and modern artistic practices and cultures into the country. If the monkey-apsara duet was one such scene, and another was where Belle and

Kethya experimented with different rhythms as discussed in Chapter 2, a third scene pushed the boundaries even further by having a large group of Cambodian dancers mix their classical and folk movement and gestural vocabulary with hip hop, breakdance and rap.

As for Phon as an individual dancer, it is not so much to pinpoint his “dancer-monkey” and “Sopheap-dancer” manifestations between the traditional and the modern. Instead, Phon’s overlapping “dancer-monkey” and “Sopheap-dancer” in his dance experimentations already exhibit the emergence of modernising aspects to his classical training, in that there already exists an on-going negotiation between the traditional and the modern under the conditions of local (Cambodian) artistic practices.

In an earlier workshop performance called *A Monkey’s Mask* (2006), Phon explored his relationship with his monkey training. It expressed the tensions of Phon as a performer as he struggled between his “Sopheap-dancer” and “monkey-dancer” sides. The performance begins with Phon discovering a monkey mask, which he puts on. It immediately transforms him into the performing classical monkey. He then tries to remove the mask but it has a magical hold on him, and he is compelled to perform classical monkey movements. Phon struggles even more to remove the mask, and when he eventually does, he has become ‘powerless’, unable to perform the classical monkey dance without it. He is slowly drawn to the mask on the floor, as if the mask is summoning him to become a classical monkey, but he tries to resist. In the end, Phon manages to break free from the mask’s spell and is able to break into classical monkey gestures and movements without it. He also starts to move freely, incorporating other movements.

Phon’s dance of struggle with the monkey mask parallels his own artistic journey as a classical dancer transitioning into more experimental and innovative choreographic works. In the beginning, Phon only knows how to be a dancer when he dons the mask, enabling him to move virtuosically. In the beginning he is an



artist solely by virtue of the fact that he is a classical monkey. As he struggles to break free from the dictates of the mask, Phon begins to be independent in his creativity, and confidently wields the monkey gestures and movements of his own free will. External customs and conventions now longer control his classical monkey. It is Phon who now possesses control over how he exercises his dance vocabulary.

There are hints of the independent artist gradually coming into his own through Phon's dance. His 'liberation' from traditional practices sees Phon dancing with confidence beyond the monkey movements. Yet the deeply entrenched classical monkey training cannot be completely excised from Phon's artistic being, so he negotiates his initial dance experimentation from his 'default' position as a classical monkey dancer. Still, it provides a rich choreographic and aesthetic foundation, which Phon can mine for future dance experimentation. We might go so far as to say that Phon's situation with his classical monkey dramatises Giddens's perspective on the tensions between a unified and fragmented self. The dancer eventually integrates his classical monkey with other body techniques and dance styles to realise a contemporary artistic identity who moves confidently between tradition and modernity by finding new modes of expression. This artistic identity is unique to the monkey master.

The monkey master's subsequent involvement in experimental dances with foreign choreographers also sees his classical monkey movements and gestures serve as a base for inventing new choreographies, such as *Transmission of the Invisible* (2008) and *Olden New Golden Blue* (2011), both choreographed by Canada-based Peter Chin. Fragments of classical monkey movements and gestures still figure in Phon's dances in both productions, but they are integrated with other movements to produce different dance vocabulary. More importantly, in *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* (2013), Phon acted as rehearsal director and assistant to returning choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon. This particular performance used classically-trained Cambodian dancers to reconstruct the movements and behaviour of monkeys in the wild. Phon was able to contribute his

experience and expertise directly to the project in more of a leadership role. Phon understands the value of adaptability in artistic and aesthetic changes – within his own limits – because it means a certain artistic advancement as well as economic stability in broadening his constraints as a classical dancer. His decision is not to leave the classical monkey behind, but to move with the monkey, with the times, toward their own kind of modernity.

### **Between Different Selves**

In an article with the sprightly title ‘Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualisation, Globalisation and Politics’, sociologist Ulrich Beck outlines 15 criteria for a “life of your own in a runaway world”, where the individual is more than ever central in a modern, globalised environment (2001, 164-174). Many of these criteria or traits apply to Phon and Klunchun as they carve out their artistic careers in the wake of their contemporary explorations, not forgetting the highly mobile performance life they lead touring abroad. In points No. 1 and No. 2, Beck states that there is “the compulsion to lead your own life, and the possibility of doing it” and that individuals “become actors, builders, jugglers, stage-managers of their own biographies and identities, but also their social links and networks” (2001, 165-166). This is true for Phon and Klunchun as they negotiate their passage from the traditional structures and limits of their classical artistic practices into contemporary dancemaking. Klunchun develops an individual artistic identity and establishes a new dance company through his Khon innovations, whereas Phon gradually shapes his artistic identity as a contemporary artist through the continuous modernising of his classical monkey base.

The most significant point that Beck makes in his article with regards to individuals such as Phon and Klunchun is that their lives are “detraditionalised” (Point No. 8). Beck does not mean that modern life is completely devoid of what he calls “traditional identities” such as ethnicity, social classifications, and even organised religiosity (2001, 168). However, the individual chooses these traditional identities as and when they become relevant. Phon and Klunchun are clear that their classical training in Lakhon Kaol and Khon respectively form the basis of their

artistic practice. They 'carry' these traditional artistic practices in themselves, but they also prefer to experiment and transform classical movements and gestures and even create new vocabularies in their contemporary works. While the migration of gestures as suggested by Noland and Ness may happen across time and space, from body to body, Phon's and Klunchun's very bodies possess the flow of migrating gestures, from classical to contemporary practices.

Consequently the traditional and the modern should not be thought of as binaries where, for example, the traditional is bound by collectivity while modernity signals individuality and innovation. Three main ideas discussed above reinforce the notion that the traditional and the modern are 'interplaying' forces that constantly develop alternative choreographic modernities such as Klunchun's Khon innovation and Phon's modern monkey. Firstly there is the proposal that transformative gestures migrate from classical to contemporary expressions where physical forms are maintained but imbued with new meanings and significations. Secondly I have demonstrated that Klunchun and Phon constantly undergo processes that 'unify' their "fragmented" traditional and modern selves as they develop their choreographies. Finally, instead of forsaking the traditional completely, Klunchun and Phon enjoy more freedom to choose which traditional artistic, social, and cultural practices they wish to retain and adapt. For Klunchun and Phon, the traditional and the modern are contiguous throughout their artistic as well as everyday lives.

Klunchun's innovative indexical self-announcing *jeeb*, together with the inclusion of his reflective personal biographies in his performances constitute distinct choreographic modernities that contribute to his dance experimentation and the materialisation of a distinct artistic identity. The same could be said for Phon in his experimentation with his classical monkey role. At the beginning of the chapter, I cited Laurence Louppe and Deborah Jowitt on the importance of individuality in contemporary dancers and choreographers that in turn influence their distinctive styles of dance and performance. This notion of individuality can be understood as a unique mix or combination of qualities possessed by a person.

Klunchun and Phon can be considered distinct individuals because of the artistic identities they portray on stage. While Louppe and Jowitt write in abstract terms about the qualities of an individual, Klunchun's and Phon's different emergent identities can be traced to their respective choreographic modernities that result from different ways of experimentation with their classical forms.

It needs to be qualified, though, that Klunchun's and Phons's respective self- and artistic identities are not entirely direct results of their choreographic modernities, since identities develop and change according to a broad range of factors. Klunchun's and Phon's experiences, or what Melrose calls sensibilities, within and beyond their own social, cultural and political environments also play a role. Different experiences, from early excellence in their respective classical training, to exposure to foreign aesthetic and cultural forms locally and globally, also contribute to shaping their performances and choreographies.

The processes behind the formation of identities are complex, and differ from one individual to another. Hence this chapter concentrates on two specific individuals to draw attention to the complexities of identity- and individuality-formation through contemporary performances that are based on the traditional.<sup>37</sup> Klunchun's and Phon's journeys into their developing individualities in dance have been gradual, if not arduous, processes where the degree of aesthetic innovation and distinctive creativity have grown with each new choreographic project. Khon and Lakhon Kaol training formed the initial aesthetic and artistic practices of the two men at young ages. Klunchun (b. 1973), started training in the demon role at the age of 13, while Phon (b. 1982) has trained for the monkey role since he was 10. Their biographies and identities, are intimately tied to their classical training. It is natural that they would evolve their contemporary dance practices based on the familiar.

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<sup>37</sup> Close observations and analyses on the development of classical gestures in other individual contemporary dancers from this region would certainly contribute further to this particular subject of self-identity and individuality in performance.

Equally significant is that both classical masters practise their traditional forms on a regular basis, either performing from a repertoire of classic Ramayana narratives, or teaching students of all ages and levels of competence. The foundations of classical training need not be in opposition to modernising influences, and perhaps regular practice reinforces a strong and familiar base for experimentation and innovation. Given time and space, Klunchun's Khon gestures and Phon's monkey character continue to undergo a process of migration and transformation into modern means of creating dances. The next chapter will extend this analysis to the choreographic modernities of the performing collective, the ensemble on stage.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**GESTURING TOWARDS IDENTITY – PART II:**  
**The Ensemble In Performance**

**Introduction**

As dancers and artists, Klunchun and Phon do not practise alone. The desire to develop individual artistic pathways does not happen without the considerations that arise from working with fellow dancers. They still belong to immediate artistic groups and networks, official or otherwise. Klunchun choreographs not only for himself, but has a burgeoning company of five dancers, whose artistic career paths and development he must take account of. Phon continues to work with his fellow classical dancers as well as foreign dancers in new works. Neither entirely breaks away from communal ties that were formed during their classical training, even as they develop new artistic alliances in their dances outside the classical community. Equally, just as Klunchun and Phon have experienced shifts in their artistic and self-identities on stage, ensemble members of organisations such as Pichet Klunchun Dance Company and Amrita Performing Arts Group are increasingly involved in experimental performances and processes and are undergoing changes in their traditional collective identities on stage.

In her perceptive article 'On Surviving Anthropocentric Modernity' (with the lengthy but descriptive subtitle 'First Thoughts on Transcending Endangered Environments for Monkey-Dancers & Macaque Monkeys in Mainland South East Asia') (2007), Thai drama scholar Pornrat Damrhung discusses the complex relationships between humans and monkeys. She covers a wide spectrum of issues, including the evolution of classical performance conventions, commercialism and modernity. In a parallel analysis, Damrhung makes a comparison between the longevity of classical monkey dances and their relevance to the enduring relationship between humans and wild Southeast Asian macaques. According to her, this relationship has taken many forms, from the agrarian practice of using monkeys in coconut harvesting, to the cultural and divine significance of the animal in religion and the classical arts.

Damrhung adds that the present day role of the monkey in Thailand is a blend of economic and cultural importance like the temple monkeys of Lopburi (named “City of Monkeys”), where an annual monkey festival attracts many tourists and hence encourages commerce and trade. In questioning the relevance of classical monkey performances in present times, she writes:

To rejuvenate and not just preserve the traditional arts, we may better hope to learn from unconventional animal spontaneity of monkeys or from new ways to arrange and to frame traditional dance. ... Monkey-artists must also change by becoming relevant to contemporary artists and audiences.

(2007, 57)

She continues by querying the “monkey dance for the future” (2007, 58) and highlights a case study of *Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants* (2005), a joint Thai-Cambodian effort in experimenting with classical monkeys and demons (giants in Cambodia), which was referenced in the previous chapter. Pichet Klunchun acted as choreographer, and worked with Cambodian classical monkey performers. It was a reworking of classical Cambodian choreography with the all-male Lakhon Kaol dancers performing a scene from the Reamker, named “The Battle of Weyreap”. As mentioned before, the Khon tradition boasts its own Ramayana convention called Ramakien, so the Cambodian and Thai dancers brought a degree of aesthetic and cultural synergy to this project. Simple black t-shirts and fisherman’s trousers in *Revitalizing* replaced the ornate costumes of the traditional version, and the dancers performed without masks. This in effect focused more attention on the virtuosic execution of the complex and intricate movements and gestures of the classical choreography, without what some members of a modern audience may think of as the distraction of elaborate costuming and masking.

The changing roles of the wild and classical monkeys, from past to present, from agrarian to cultural and then to economic and aesthetic significance, have equally direct implications on the ways the monkeys’ identities shift and transform. The Amrita dancers’ early experimentation with *Revitalizing* hinted at the

possibilities of this creative transformation in their classical monkey but within the confines of the traditional narrative of the Reamker. The monkey performers remained mythical beings in their battle against magical giants. Building on the “monkey dance for the future” raises the possibility of transforming the classical monkey role further, while retaining its ‘monkey-ness’.

In other words, can an ensemble of classical monkeys be reconfigured other than as Hanuman’s soldiers, yet still capitalise on the dancers’ physical skills and virtuosity? The question could extend to the other classical roles in Thai Ramakien and Cambodian Reamker performances of demon (Ravana – for its ‘demon-ness’), hero (Rama – the ideal male figure) and heroine (Sita – the ideal female figure). In asking these questions, there are certain differences that need to be noted between classical performance conventions and experimental innovations.

For instance, on stage, the Khon and Lakhon Kaol performers carve out a stable ensemble identity as they perform from the Ramayana repertoire. The pantheon of Ramayana characters such as Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Ravana do not alter, as they appear in familiar scenes with recurring characters undergoing the same drama. The onstage identity of classical performances thus remains stable, with recurring characters appearing in the relevant scenes or stories within the Ramayana cosmology. From the outset, a new feature of this alternative ensemble is that instead of playing supporting roles to the main characters, they become the main focus instead. I also consider Damrhung’s notions of “unconventional animal spontaneity” and “new ways to arrange and to frame traditional dance”. These classical dancers, I contend, need to consider all manner of spontaneity, animal or otherwise, so that their innovative means of arranging and framing dance can give rise to new modes of expression. Specifically, the monkey ensemble in Amrita’s *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* (2013) and demon army in Klunchun’s *Black and White* (2011) take centre stage in their respective performances, and the choreographic strategies change accordingly. In this chapter, I propose that one result is a change in the identity of the ensemble. I also explore the possibility of a new relationship forming between the performing ensemble and the audience: are



there changes in how an audience watches such performances, or do their spectating processes remain the same?

### **Differences Yielding Diversities**

Continuing her collaboration with Amrita, choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon worked on the third instalment of her *Khmeropedies* series in 2011 (*Khmeropedies I & II*, had been presented in 2009). This time Phuon focused on creating a performance with dancers trained in the classical *sua* (Khmer: monkey). The choreographer wanted to work with younger Cambodian *sua* dancers who have substantial Lakhon Kaol experience but have yet to explore other types of choreography. Phuon was also interested in primate kinaesthetics or kinematics, the study of motion systems in a particular object or body. She invited Yale paleontologist Eric Sargis to participate in the production by providing technical and scientific information on the finer details of monkey kinematics, social behaviour and culture. Eight male dancers eventually participated in the workshop phases and the performance. As dramaturg for this particular project, I observed workshop and rehearsal sessions in 2011 and 2013, which led up to its New York premiere in April 2013.

Phuon decided on a loose structure of zoological vignettes that were studies of physical, social and cultural aspects of monkeys and primates in the wild. Some scenes illustrated the physical capacities of the dancers to move as various species of monkey, while others were devoted to demonstrating primate social and cognitive behaviours. Specific segments showed kinship and territorial behaviour, monkeys at rest and play, social (and perhaps even cultural) responses to death, and a scene on self-awareness depicting monkeys' reactions to their own mirror reflections. There is more than a passing similarity in *Source/Primate* to animal documentaries. It is a documentary performance where choreography becomes the tool in constructing a 'docu-dance' performance involving the dramaturgy of 'real', 'natural' or 'wild' monkey and primate data.

The nature of the performance in *Source/Primate*, with its fragmented and episodic narrative, is a departure from the stable linear plots of classical Lakhon Kaol. More importantly, central characters whose actions drive the narrative, such as Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Ravana, do not exist in Phuon's performance. In Ramayana scenes, low-ranking monkey soldiers remain mostly in the same role throughout a performance, while the monkeys in *Source/Primate* change constantly, portraying numerous species of monkeys in a variety of situations. The supporting monkey troops of the Ramayana not only take on a major focus in *Source/Primate*, but their identities on stage are in constant flux: from one fixed *sua*, individual dancers become many types of monkeys through different styles of movements and behaviour.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Lakhon Kaol has three distinct styles of *sua* performance. First, there is the monkey king or Hanuman, which exhibits the most stylised movements and gestures, and is most human-like and upright in position and therefore considered the most regal in appearance. Second, there is the soldier monkey, who possesses less refined gestures. And third is the Battambang (a city located in northwestern Cambodia) monkey, which is closest in its physicality to the wild animal. The Battambang *sua* style is mostly associated with humorous and clownish Ramayana scenes that involve juvenile or young monkeys. There is a certain standardisation of positions, movements and gestures in Lakhon Kaol *sua* roles: even though army monkey characters are divided into different ranks such as private, corporal, sergeant, they are usually differentiated by the degree of ornamentation and colour of their costumes and masks. Consistency in movements and gestures means that a system of codification with set meanings has developed through time. This standardisation is also thought to safeguard the consistency of performance quality throughout the country, through the establishment of consistent teaching and training methods.

Over the course of the *Source/Primate* workshops and rehearsals, the dancers learned 'new' monkey movements through improvisations, observations, the viewing of monkey, chimpanzee and gorilla documentaries, and lectures by

Sargis. Phuon would also have the dancers investigate their classical monkey in relation to the 'wild' monkey movements, and discuss their differences and similarities by demonstrations and show-and-tell sessions. The dancers had an opportunity to observe and study several species of monkey up close when Phuon organised an excursion to the local Phnom Tao zoo just outside Phnom Penh. This approach to learning monkey movements and gestures for *Source/Primate* contrasts with training and learning methods experienced by the classical dancers. With the exception that Lakhon Kaol *sua* novices also observe live monkeys – perhaps just one local species – initial classes and training involve copying the gestures of their masters or seniors. They then perfect the system of movements in regimented training sessions and classes before they are taught the set repertoire of stories and scenes.

By contrast, Phuon's approach was to choreograph 'new' movements that the dancers were unfamiliar with. The classical dancers' biggest advantage when they began rehearsals on *Source/Primate* was their physical agility, strength and stamina as a result of classical *sua* training. Later, the performers felt there was a sense that, by comparison with their strict adherence to the classical canon, they had contributed more towards the creation of Phuon's performance.

The idea behind *Source/Primate* was to highlight monkey movements as dance while also underlining the breadth of physical skills of the classical dancers. Phuon chose a variety of primate kinematics and behaviour from a wide range of monkey and ape species to choreograph the resulting performance. Her research included watching the movements and actions of chimpanzees, gorillas, orang utans, macaques, gibbons, lemurs and sifakas (belonging to the lemur species). Differentiation was an important element for Phuon, as detail and precision meant that contrasting movement qualities and styles could be used effectively throughout her choreography. It was about being specific with macaque-runs, sifaka-leaps, lemur-jumps, gibbon-gaits, chimpanzee-scampers and gorilla-squats. Placement and shape of fingers were also important details, such as the half-curved digits with knuckles exposed of gorillas; landing sifaka lemurs that touch the

ground with the balls of the feet before leaping into the air again; and that monkeys in general move on all four limbs. During rehearsals Phuon and Sargis referred closely to videos of movements of different monkey species that was then distributed to different dancers by Phuon. The dancers then learned the specific ways of walking, running, jumping, sitting and so on, demonstrated by the numerous monkey species selected by Phuon for their aesthetics in motion.

Contrasting movements from differing species could also be used to compose a single dance segment. This was most evident in the 20-minute opening sequence, where dancers moved at varying speeds in the style of different species of monkeys. A dancer would scamper across stage on all four limbs like a chimpanzee, and then run on his hind legs with outstretched upper limbs like a gibbon on a returning path. So the dancers kept switching body positions and movement styles, being many monkey species in a single dance segment. There may be three distinct styles of *sua* in Lakhon Kaol but they all possess basic movement and gestures: bodies are flattened, shoulders squared, stances in demi-pliés, and directions are profiled either left or right with movements measured and exaggerated. By contrast, the monkey movements in *Source/Primate* are as diverse as they are numerous.

### **New Identities in Multiplicities and Becomings**

As demonstrated above, the ensemble in *Source/Primate* chiefly exhibits degrees of diversity or multiplicity in its movement choreography, narrative, work methods and even within the ensemble that functions as a whole. This quality of multiplicity is most apparent in the performance itself with the ensemble of eight dancers moving through a multitude of choreographic compositions in a variety of scenes. The ensemble also exhibits multiplicities in its portrayals of many species of monkeys through the different degrees and levels of training, skills and talents of the dancers. If we focus on the ensemble of performing monkeys in multiplicity (as opposed to a multiplicity of monkeys), then we might say that the dancers are portraying 'monkey multiplicity' within an entire form – a 'chimpanzee-gorilla-macaque-gibbon-lemur-sifaka multiplicity' in *Source/Primate*.

Deleuze and Guattari are strong advocates of this particular type or degree of multiplicity, where there is no hard and fast distinction between the one and the many, and where they view different types and kinds mingling and proliferating in what they call an assemblage: “multiplicities with heterogenous terms ... enter certain *assemblages*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 267. Emphasis in original). As an assemblage, the ‘monkey multiplicity’ in *Source/Primate* continuously changes with the development of each scene, allowing for different kinds of ‘monkey’ diversity and variety in movement, gesture, vocalisation and behaviour to come into focus at different points. As Deleuze puts it more generally: “In assemblages you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs” (2006, 177).

This assemblage of monkeys is a new form, a new identity for the dancers in performance. As suggested by Livesey, “[t]he result of a productive assemblage is a new means of expression ... a new behaviour, or a new realisation” (Livesey 2010, 19). This “new means of expression” is fluid and always changing in the nature of the performance, unlike the fixed ensemble performances of classical works. An assemblage possessing and exhibiting fluid and ever-changing multiplicities makes for an ideal identity expression, a “becoming”, as recognised by Deleuze and Guattari. In the case of the *Source/Primate* dancers, we might say that they enter into a “becoming-animal” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 256-341).

The philosophers also clarify that:

To become animal is to participate in movement ... to cross a threshold ... to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, to the benefit of an unformed matter.

(1986, 13)

Dance as movement provides an ideal medium for the “becoming-animal” of the *Source/Primate* ensemble. They move or dance as a ‘mix’ of human-monkey(s) entities on stage, ebb and flow: different monkeys in all their external and internal features dominate some scenes while human characteristics come to the fore in

others. The dancers “become” something other than distinctly monkey or human, they constantly “cross a threshold” between monkey and human, and back again, into a ‘becoming-monkey’. New configurations are produced in monkey-human/human-monkey gestures and characterisation with different intensities of speed, rhythm and strength, as well as varied modes of physical and vocal expressions. As the entire ensemble or group of dancers move together to yield a new identity of ‘becoming-monkey’ typified by Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of a “block of becoming” (1988, 262-263) the result is an assemblage of many individual ‘becomings-monkey’.

This ‘becoming-monkey’ is an alternative and helpful concept to examine the processes of emergent identities of these dance practitioners in performance. While their classical roles or characters are fixed and stable identities maintained within equally constant narratives, the *Source/Primate* dancers’ shift in their identity expression involve performing multiplicities in movements and stories. The ensemble’s ‘becomings-monkey’ is always in the process of transformation or metamorphosis, because “becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination ... becoming only has a middle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 323). What’s more this quality of continuousness lends itself to the fluid and variable construction of their on-stage identity. The “unconventional animal spontaneity” sought by Damrhung may very well be the process of “becoming” – neither monkey nor human, shifting from human to monkey, and back. The spontaneity is continual and creative in its transformations, expressing different and sustained intensities of feelings or physical characterisations throughout the performance.

The eight Amrita dancers may be trained in a standardised fashion in classical *sua* but their individual and varying physical adeptness and strengths, not to mention their differing physical attributes in shapes and sizes, nonetheless present their own multiplicities. These physical and skill ranges contribute to their ‘becomings-monkey’. This can be illustrated by examining the prologue and the first scene of the performance. As an opening to *Source/Primate*, three dancers

enter the stage and stand facing the audience. Slowly, they adjust their stances into those of monkeys: the dancer in the centre poses as a classical *sua*, as Hanuman, and the other two portray monkeys in the wild. The three dancers execute a series of poses and gestures to differentiate between the stylised classical and the 'natural wild': standing alert, on the lookout, show of strength, scratching, walking, emotions of joy and exhilaration, attack, and even their indexical presences indicated by the *jeeb* gesture for the Hanuman while the 'wild' monkeys exhibit a 'non-gesture', on their four limbs (Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1: Screen capture of prologue of *Source/Primate* - Hanuman with *jeeb* in the centre**

The quiet and still ambience of the study of Hanuman and the wild monkeys is shattered by the next scene with the entrance of the dancers dashing and running onto the stage in different styles and manners (Figure 4.2). The audience is assailed by different movement styles of gibbons, sifakas, lemurs, chimpanzees and gorillas. They scamper singly, and then in various configurations of loose groups and lines, entering and exiting the four corners of the stage. They criss-cross each other and meet in the middle of the stage to either disperse in opposite directions or join into bigger bands of monkeys. As the momentum of the scene builds, 'monkeys' jump while others leap across one another in mid air. The 20-

minute scene builds to a climax where the troop run frantically on all fours in a circle until they abruptly end with a jump in unison.



**Figure 4.2: Screen capture of the first scene of *Source/Primate* showing various monkey runs and jumps. Photo by Anders Jiras**

The prologue provides a comparative view of the dancers with distinct differentiating forms, movements, gestures and styles between classical and wild monkeys. In this straightforward demonstration, the stylised *sua* and the two natural monkeys are easily distinguished in well-defined parts as the dancers proceed from pose to pose, gesture to gesture in a linear manner. On the other hand, the proceeding scene of the proliferation of eight monkeys moving in numerous ways can be likened to “a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 264). More than that, Deleuze and Guattari state very specific definitions and conditions where multiplicity is seen as “becomings”:

A multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor by a centre of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature ... a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities...*

(1988, 275. Emphasis in original)



Whereas the prologue is comparative, and places the *sua* at the centre, the first scene, with all its energy and dynamism would, lose its impact and effect had not all dancers been involved in the scene. The entire ensemble was needed to enter into a 'becomings-monkey' because each dancer brings with him unique physical attributes and skills that add to the multiplicity. Some dancers scamper as chimps while others run upright as sifakas, yet others gallop like gorillas, in a single scene. The same dancers who run like sifakas also leap like gibbons, and those who scamper like chimps also double up with their strides as lemurs in the same scene. The uniqueness of the dancers' individual physical shapes and sizes with their different levels of skills means each and every dancer contributes in specific ways that are exceptional to the individual. The eight dancers with their unique multiplicities then band together to form new and "not divisible" multiplicities that are 'becomings-monkey' with equally original "dimensions" or qualities.

As the dancers' 'becomings-monkeys' are not fixed throughout their performance, their particular multiplicities change and transform correspondingly. These multiplicities can take on physical and bodily traits, such as the 'running monkeys' scene above, while other scenes exhibit entirely different types of multiplicities. Physically or kinetically energetic scenes in *Source/Primate* were balanced with segments that portrayed 'quieter' aspects of monkey life. These scenes reflected simian social behaviours and exhibited other types of multiplicities. For instance, there is a playful sequence with three pairs of monkey duets, a curious and comic segment where the monkeys confront their mirror reflections, the sombre ambient of the monkeys patrolling their territory, the aggression exhibited in a pair of fighting monkeys; and a poignant death scene. The qualities of the death scene in *Source/Primate* are in stark contrast with the 'running monkeys' scene. Sargis had shown Phuon a National Geographic video clip of chimpanzees reacting to one of their dead that seemed like human mourning behaviour (*Chimps "Mourn" Nine-year-old's Death?* 2011, <http://video.nationalgeographic.com>). Phuon suggested they re-enact the video clip. In *Source/Primate*, the dancers/chimps quietly approach a lifeless body and begin slowly to test it for signs of life (Figure 4.3). They sniff at the dead

dancer's/chimp's face and inspect his mouth as if looking for signs of breathing. Others lift and move its limbs as if to confirm that it is lifeless. The scene was performed in total silence, yet the image evoked strong emotions. The multiplicities in the death scene shift from physical effects to affective expressions in nature. More importantly, these affective qualities were produced or generated by the dancers themselves.



**Figure 4.3: Screen capture of *Source/Primate* of the monkeys searching for signs of life in body. Photo by Anders Jiras**

In classical conventions such as Lakhon Kaol, emotive and dramatic scenes are heavily supported by a singing narrator and musicians, who provide story and emotion through song and music. The classical performers on stage represent the actions of the dramatic sequence in their execution of stylised dance movements and gestures skilfully. The supporting narrator and musicians, for most part, contribute in a more evocative manner. There is a shift in how 'natural' monkeys in *Source/Primates* rely on their own bodies to present stories and generate dramatic tension from that of classical *sua* who are supported by musicians and narrator along with highly stylised costumes and masks. Other than physical

multiplicities, the *Source/Primate* dancers also in their 'becomings-monkey', demonstrate a 'monkey-multiplicity' "that is continually transforming into a string of other multiplicities" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 275) that affect the audience in different ways, such as the death scene. This "string of other multiplicities" manifest in diverse ways and produce distinct effects as well. Dance reviewer Alastair Macauley remarked that the death scene was affective:

... nothing is more marvelous than the individual characterizations with which each other monkey reacts. There is no overt display of emotion, but the long, steady, unflinching gaze of one man into his colleague's dead face — while others tenderly, coolly examine the lifeless limbs and feet — is a most moving image.

(2013, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

On the other hand, Macauley's reaction to the more physical scenes in the performance produced comments on how "certain athletic passages are breathtaking" and also observed the "control" and "fluency" of spine and thigh work of the dancers in the 'running monkeys' scene (2013).

On the other hand, the performers in *Source/Primate* enter into their performance assemblage as a *composite* of diverse monkey species as opposed to the limited range of the classical Hanuman, low ranked soldier or Battambang monkeys. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern introduces an alternative perspective in analysing the individual with regards to a collective. She writes that persons can be "dividually" perceived where 'dividual' persons exhibit characteristics of a "generalized sociality within". This gives rise to the idea of "partible" or "distributed" persons where "persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm" (1988,13). When examined through this perspective, the 'dividual', the 'partible performer' in *Source/Primate* who possesses fragmented monkey roles, is homologous to the larger ensemble of monkeys in their multiple fragments of movements, gestures and expressions.

The dancer's fragments-as-whole then goes on to build towards new multiplicities. Instead of contributing a unified part to the performance

assemblage, the dancers collectively *share* in assembling the performance. Their roles, in their different qualities and extents, produce distinct multiplicities that alter within a scene as well as between scenes. The single identity of a *Source/Primate* performer with his composite of monkey species is then an extension of the identity of the assemblage of monkeys with its own composite of myriad species resulting in separate and new multiplicities.

The differences between the performing ensemble identities of the stable classical repertoire, and the fluid and transforming experimental works beyond it, have implications for the performers involved. To begin, the classical ensemble dancer entering choreographic experimentation has to be open to fluid and fluctuating methods of performance-making, and to responding accordingly. They bring with them not merely physical skills that add aesthetic value to different choreographies. Experimenting with classical vocabularies goes beyond mechanical ‘cutting and pasting’ or ‘inserting’ visually-pleasing monkey, demon or hero gestures and movements into other dance compositions. The dancer must be cognisant of other attributes such as innovation and adaptability. For example, the experimental *sua* vocabulary in different narratives in *Source/Primate* or modern significations and meanings in traditional gestures, with Klunchun’s *jeeb* in his *Nijinsky Siam*. Adaptability in performance strategies are imperative where individual dancers are not merely fixed in their aesthetic and creative functions of an ensemble, but contribute actively in a dynamic fashion to complete the ensemble. This composite of physical virtuosity, creativity, innovation and adaptability would then result in a productive assemblage of ever-growing and transforming multiplicities in the dancer.

### **Of ‘Faint Becomings’**

There are times when the pluralities in the classical dance vocabularies “become” creative multiplicities, as demonstrated in the *sua* gestural foundations that produced fluid “becomings” in the case of *Source/Primate*. On the other hand there are instances when the transformation from a stable set of plural vocabularies into shifting physical multiplicities is not as straightforward or

'smooth'. Nonetheless these 'weak' or 'faint' "becomings" yield insights into the processes of choreographic experimentation. One of the implications here is that the analysis of 'faint' "becomings" may enable us to ascertain the mechanics of transition processes – effective or otherwise – from classical performances to experimental ones.

In the following example, classical dancers re-assemble their monkey and demon characters into "becomings", a sort of 'becomings-demon-monkey'. This particular assemblage was a highlight of Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun's *Black and White* (2011). Loosely based on the "The Battle of Miayarap" in the Ramakien, which recounts the epic battle of the supreme monkey Hanuman and his monkey troops with the demon king Ravana and his minions, the performance was choreographed specifically for Klunchun's company dancers who are all trained in Khon. There was, however, a significant departure from the original myth of straightforward conflicts between monkeys and demons in "The Battle of Miayarap". Instead of following the Ramakien text, Klunchun was attracted to a painting of a monkey and demon locked in fight position, with Hanuman perched high on Ravana's back as if subjugated him. Klunchun was intrigued by how the perception of a fight scene could be changed by suggesting ambiguity in the painting. In *Black and White*, original Ramakien fight scenes were distorted and transformed to look as if opposing monkey and demon dancers were supporting and balancing each other. These scenes were created through a series of complex contact improvisations based on Khon monkey and demon movements, stances, and hand and feet gestures. The Khon movements were re-choreographed into a series of successive tableaux that contained two, three and four monkey and demon dancers respectively engaged in 'Khon contact improvisation'.

The audience gets an initial sense of the traditional monkey and demon movements and gestures when the four dancers are dressed in updated and altered Khon costumes and masks at the beginning of the piece (Figure 4.4). Soon after, the monkeys and demons exit, and return bare-chested wearing tight, skin-

coloured shorts that gives the visual impression they are almost in the nude. Each dancer then performs a short solo each that exhibits movements and gestures that are different from their classical repertoire. Only hints of Khon remain in their solos, which have been transformed into individuated choreographies (this was discussed and analysed in Chapter 2). As the performance progresses, the dancers join, first two of them, then three and finally four, to form a quartet moving and travelling across the stage. The quartet does this with the individual dancers engaging in complicated contact points through their bodies and limbs, supplemented by arm lifts, supports and balances.



**Figure 4.4: Posed picture of altered Khon masks and costumes in *Black and White*. Photo by Pichet Klunchun Dance Company**

In *Black and White*, Klunchun developed the two-dimensional, flat-profiled tradition of Khon performances into more ‘three-dimensional’ choreographies. Khon performance aesthetics consist of “basic square, flat stance” where performers pose in “visual friezes” during dramatic moments, just like two-dimensional paintings and shadow puppetry (Brandon 1993, 237). For instance, fight scenes between Hanuman and Ravana, or Rama and Ravana, are portrayed

or choreographed as static tableaux where one performer is positioned on top of another by stepping onto the other's thigh. The dueling dancers hold the pose for about ten counts before releasing. The *Black and White* monkey and demons do not freeze in pose when they engage in duets, trios and quartets. There is constant movement from pose to pose, from position to position, producing continuous dance between the dancers. They are also not limited to square and flat profiles but constantly change their orientation, moving and facing through 360 degrees in their tableaux.

What remains of the Khon aesthetics are the sharp and angular positions of upper limbs, with straight upright torsos, and lower limbs in *demi-plie* positions. In the end the *Black and White* monkey-demon scenes portray a mass of bodies that dance with one another, with multiple skin-on-skin contact points, always switching positions between bodies. The mass surges forward or backward, travelling from one spot to another. Together, the dancers they move like a well-oiled machine, though at the same time their movements are separate, clear and precise to the audience. Ambiguity arises in the dramatic tensions staged between the bodies: rather than demonstrating outright conflict, they sometimes look more like they are supporting and balancing each other in order to maintain continuous movement and unity.

This 'Khon contact – *Khontact* – improvisation' holds rich potential for extending out of the existing traditional form. Singapore critics were generally enthusiastic at the premier of *Black and White*. It seemed Klunchun had found an entry point that was contiguous with the tradition in *Black and White*, while exploring his classical form in present dance practices. Arts critic Mayo Martin in his review described *Black and White* as an “artistic breakthrough” where “Khon isn't just a traditional form within the context of a contemporary dance piece, it's morphed into something contemporary.” (2011). Dance writer Stephanie Burrige commented in her review in arts web site, *The Flying Inkpot*, that it was “an absorbing experiment” in a Southeast Asian classical form that emphasised dancing bodies rather than the narrative (2011). Another dance writer also

highlighted the theme of balance in the dancers' "complicated poses, finding balance in ways you wouldn't believe. Klunchun had also found perfect balance in bringing the contemporary and traditional elements together, as one never outweighed the other throughout" (Koh 2011, 30). The monkey-demons assemblage is neither human, monkey nor demon but a "becoming" of sorts. The emergent form of this 'becoming-demon-monkey' is distinct, producing its own multiplicities, and yet the individual bodies also display their separate physical diversity, that in turn contribute to the "becoming's" multiplicities.

At the same time, there was also critique directed specifically at the monkey-demon formations. Reviewer Koh accused the four dancers of having "run out of steam towards the end, however, during an energetic intensity, even if the strain in their muscles was obvious enough for the front row to notice." (2011, 30). Burrige wrote: "The four dancers showed great control and flexibility but appeared lost and naked when facing the audience stripped of their elaborate costumes and masks" (2011). As dramaturg, I observed that the monkey-demons' "becomings" exhibited an exciting development in the Khon form, but there was indeed awkwardness in its physical configurations and movement in the sequence.

During rehearsals for *Black and White*, I noted Klunchun was becoming increasingly frustrated with his four male dancers in the monkey-demons formation. The problem was not their ability to master the duet, or morph into the trio and quartet of monkey-demons. In fact the classically-trained dancers managed to learn the complex movements in a relatively short period of time. Klunchun's concern was that the movements looked mechanical and awkward, although their qualities suggested otherwise. Klunchun surmised that, "The dancers are not getting into character and they do not feel anything for the movements. They do not build their characters and their relationships with the movements." He felt that the dancers were only capable of physically executing the difficult movements but did not give much thought to the development of the narrative within the scene.



Developing characters should pose a relatively simple task for the classical Khon dancers, who have background training in dance drama conventions. Character attributes in classical Khon (as well as Lakhon Kaol) rely on visual markers. On the other hand, the archetypal characters in the Ramayana cosmology are familiar figures to Khon dancers who have trained for more than ten years. Additionally, this new incarnation of monkey-demons is not so clear-cut with attributes that are neither representing good nor bad, light nor dark. Indeed the 'becomings-monkey-demon' was black *and* white.

Specifically, the problem may have lain in *which* of the myriad contact points between two or more dancers represented or expressed which quality of good or evil. The dancers may have been confused by when they were to 'fight' and when they were to 'support' each other during their 'becomings-monkey-demon'. Klunchun might have carefully choreographed the "becomings" sequence with great detail paid to who did what to whom and with what point of contact, but confusion in characterisation could have been simply about clarifying *intentions* during each and every contact point between the dancers. Is it a fight or support moment?

### **Mis(s)fit Multiplicities**

When Deleuze and Guattari illustrate "becomings", the entities or bodies that come together to create new forms have clear 'intentions'. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack" (1988, 264). There must be a sort of attraction – or intense obsession – between the existing bodies to enter into a "becoming". In Deleuze and Guattari's examples of the rat-loving Willard and his "becoming-rat" in the movie *Ben*, Captain Ahab in his "becoming-whale" through his obsession with Moby Dick and even the natural example of the symbiotic wasp-orchid block of "becoming" (1988, 257; 268; 263), suggest intentions that are the points of contact between two entities in their "becomings". In *Ben*, the contact point between human Willard and rat Ben that ignites Willard's "becoming" is the moment when Willard has to choose between his human destiny of staying with other humans, or joining his beloved rat Ben and

his rodent pack (1988, 257). At that particular contact point there is an intention in Willard to “become” what is Ben, the rat. The orchid that imitates the female wasp anatomy entices the male wasp to ‘mate’ with it while transferring the flower’s pollen onto the male wasp. There is literally a physical contact point between wasp and orchid when they are joined in “a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp”: the wasp’s intention to mate, the orchid’s intention to distribute pollen (1988, 11). There are opposite sides of giving and receiving that complement the whole action.

Contact made between a demon and a monkey in conventional Khon usually communicates a physical fight or conflict. When the monkey steps on the demon’s thigh during their fight tableau, the contact point communicates the monkey subduing the demon. The monkey’s offensive gesture of thrusting his arms at its opponent, the demon, is usually met with an equally defensive arm-blocking response by a demon. What’s more, Klunchun has also choreographed additional fight movements from Thai kick-boxing, Muay Thai, into the mix of Khon monkey-demon dance moves. A leg kick from the opponent is usually blocked by the lower limb of the other. An upper limb jab is thwarted by the opponent’s arm.

In *Black and White*, the most obvious images of support arise when one dancer clasps his hands over his partner’s torso, arm or leg. However, other familiar combative hand-to-hand, leg-to-arm, leg-to-torso gestures have lost their original intentions or meanings of attack, block, or defence. For instance, in a particular sequence of the performance, a pair of dueting/dueling dancers begin with Khon fight movements that have been reconfigured to complement the opposing halves. Instead of arm lunges blocked by opposing upper limbs, a pair of dancers engages in ‘arms-lock’. Their curved arms ‘hook’ onto each other and move together. This then is followed by the demon dancer stepping on the monkey dancer’s open palm, but they do not signify a fight. Rather, the monkey dancer on the ground stabilises, supports and props his partner up using his palm

(Figure 4.5). This particular pair of dancers who may move in an aggressive manner are nonetheless obviously moving complementary to each other.



**Figure 4.5: Screen capture of *Black and White* of a pair of dancers (left) in a 'balance' pose, instead of fight in demon dancer supported by the monkey dancer's palm**

On the other hand, another pair of dancers in another scene – both with demon gestures and movements – begin a duel with a mixture of demon and Muay Thai attack gestures. Ordinarily, the two demon characters would not be engaged in a fight sequence. However, they appear again later on in another series of contact movements that, this time, suggest 'support' and 'balance'. These 'support' movements however are generated through a series of kicks and stomps that are 'attack' in origin. The fast swing of the stomp quickly changes into a gentle contact between the tips of the dancers' feet (Figure 4.6). The sequence is further compounded when a monkey dancer joins them to form a trio. The vigorous entrance of the monkey suggests an attack approach as he fights with one of the demons. The complication begins when the other demon seems to be assaulting his fellow instead of mounting an attack on the monkey (Figure 4.7). Hence the actions of the demons seem to reverse from 'support' to 'fight' again in some movement sequences. Firstly, the shifts between 'fight' and 'support' between the demons seem clear enough with their attack gestures that include Muay Thai combat movements. However the scene then becomes obfuscated when the

attacking monkey participates in the action. One demon goes back to attack mode and the two halves of an action between the demons are 'mixed' – one engages in battle while another engages 'support' mode.



**Figure 4.6: Screen capture of *Black and White* of demons that begin in a fight eventually end up with 'support' gestures through the feet**

One of the conditions of “becoming” is the presence or effect of multiplicities of separate entities acting on each other to produce more varied multiplicities. While Deleuze and Guattari state that a multiplicity need not to be defined by its parts or of a certain unity, it is explained through its “dimensions” or features (1988, 275). What are lacking in the physical multiplicities of Khon and Muay Thai gestures in the *Black and White* scenes may very well be specifically defined features of fight, block, support and balance for every contact point in their “becomings-monkey-demon”. Consequently these features could be reinterpreted as having more definite “feelings” for the dancers’ characterisations and their relationships, which according to Klunchun were lacking in the sequence, rendering them awkward and even mechanical. Well-defined characterisations would also mean that the dancers could relate to each other in a more concrete

manner: who is fighting whom in one sequence; who is supporting whom in another.



**Figure 4.7: Screen capture of *Black and White* where the monkey mounts an attack on the demon while the other demon (left) seems to be tugging his fellow demon in opposite direction**

In the case of the *Source/Primate's* “becomings-monkey”, their “modes of expression” together with their “combination of bodies” in their multiplicities were more distinct and defined. The multiplicities there had everything to do with monkeys in physical, social, and even emotional dimensions with well-carved out situations in each scene, whether physical exertion or death. With the help of their bodies already in a state of classical physical *sua* pluralities, they enter into “becomings” with a multiplicity of monkey aspects of different species, but of one *genus*, no less. This is not to say that an even more complicated “becoming” involving three entities or bodies – human, monkey and demon – cannot ever take

place. The complex combination(s) or (triple) metamorphoses of human, monkey and demons and everything in between would require closer scrutiny of how and where the dancers' individual multiplicities act on each other.

### **Reconfiguring The Audience and the Performer**

The “becomings” of the dancers in *Source/Primate* and *Black and White* constitute two levels of choreographic modernities that enable the emergence of new identities on stage. At the first level, the dancers reconfigure and develop their classical gestures and movements in a dynamic manner to produce choreographic modernities in the form of multiplicities of new gestures and movements: the monkey movements in *Source/Primate* and the monkey-demon formations in *Black and White*. The second level of choreographic modernity is a result of these very multiplicities of monkey and monkey-demon gestures coalescing into “becomings” that are fluid and shifting: ‘becomings-monkey’ of *Source/Primate* and ‘becomings-monkey-demon’ of *Black and White*. Again, there is a circularity in which the processes of choreographic modernities are the new gestures and movements as well as the resulting emergent collective identities on stage.

If these choreographic modernities result from reconfigurations of the ensemble identities on stage, can the same be said for the audience viewing the dancers' experimental performances: is it possible for the dancers' choreographic modernities to reconfigure or reorganise spectatorship? Firstly, there is a change in how local audiences, specifically, perceive the ensembles of classical dancers in *Source/Primate* and *Black and White*. As discussed in Chapter 3, classical performances of the Ramakien and Reamker stories contain didactic elements to help shape correct behaviour within the communities where they are performed. For instance, when Hanuman and his monkey troop go into battle to save Sita from the demon king Ravana, the scene conveys firstly, the grand narrative of good prevailing over evil, and secondly, the desired quality of loyalty and obedience as demonstrated by the monkey king towards Rama by rescuing Sita.

Stripped of their codified traditional costumes and performing either in everyday clothing (such as the *Source/Primate* dancers) or “nude” dance shorts (as in the *Black and White* dancers), the audience can no longer rely on recurring moral tales with identifiable archetypes as in classical convention. The new collective identities on stage can then ‘reconfigure’ or ‘re-organise’ the audience’s viewing process with kinesthetics and affects produced by the dancers’ in their continuous transformation of gestures and movements. The ‘becomings-monkey’ and ‘becomings-monkey-demon’ engage the audience differently through bodily and emotive qualities – of sensuousness and sensuality.

Secondly, specific to *Source/Primate*, when the dancers enter into ‘becomings-monkey’ the boundaries between monkey and human are constantly blurred, which is very different from the classical *sua* with its set system of movements and identifiable costumes and masks. By blurring the human/monkey divide, the ‘becomings-monkey’ offers another perspective that actually highlights similarities between monkeys and humans more than in the classical conventions. While classical performances act out dramas that teach the audience lessons, it does this with an archetype that is distinctly non-human in appearance and physical stylisation. Just like in the earlier example of Hanuman symbolising loyalty, bravery and cunning through his battle with Ravana, we are to believe that we should follow the examples of a mythical monkey, albeit an anthropomorphised one. By contrast, the ‘becomings-monkey’ that share traits and characteristics closer to the wild primates and simians exhibit more similarities – especially behaviourally – with the human audience in social situations of kinship, conflict and death as described in previous sections. The Singapore performance prompted reviewer Lisabel Ting (posted on *AsiaOne* news site) to respond that “the primal behaviour [in the monkeys] seemed a little too human for comfort” in the monkeys’ territorial scene (Ting 2013). In a more academic reflection, anthropologist Bernard Bate complicated the monkey-human relationship in *Source/Primate* even further by recalling the genealogy of monkey-early hominid-human. He writes in his web blog:

The contrast between the two modes of dance, the stylised and naturalistic, indexed to me sentience and its absence among our African and Asian cousins in Chimps, Bonobos, Gorillas, Orangs and Gibbons, on the one hand, and among our ancestors such as Australopithecus on the other.

(2013)

Damrhung suggests a distance between classical *sua* performers and their audience as the monkey performers are “trained to express themselves as Monkeys, perhaps as gods too, but not as human beings” (58, 2007). Perhaps in the choreographic modernity of reconfiguring classical *sua* to ‘becomings-monkey’, the distance between audience and monkeys is reduced, where the human/animal divide is reconfigured. The ‘becomings-monkey’ in *Source/Primate* are closer to the human audience than the classical *sua* with all its stylised godly features. In examining the concept of “becoming-animal” Nato Thompson suggests that the phenomenon suggests a destabilisation of “boundaries modernity established between humanity and animal kingdom” (2005, 8). A performance such as *Source/Primate* suggests a different modernity whereby the relationship between humans and animals are intertwined in complicated ways where we turn to animals to look for our humanity.

Jacques Rancière writes of the passive audience in performances who are expected to receive “straight, uniform transmission” of knowledge, ideas, and thoughts directly intended by the artists (2009, 13-14). He then argues the makers of modern performances in their myriad genres “do not wish to instruct the spectator. ... They simply wish to produce a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action” (2009, 14). These modern performances, he contends, give rise to what he calls the “emancipated spectator” who is not passive but engages with the performance by processing and interpreting the contents of the actions on stage through the spectator’s own “associations and dissociations” based on one’s own life experiences (2009, 17). It could be said then a similar process of “spectator emancipation” occurs for the local audiences familiar with Klunchun and the Amrita dancer’s classical repertoire that “instructs” but presently have to re-establish how they view the dancers’ experimental works.



While localised modern cultural forms of western popular entertainment (film, music and television) and contemporary performances exist in present-day Bangkok, local experimentation with classical Thai forms is rare. Jitti Chompee, who regularly fuses ballet aesthetics with classical Thai forms and narratives, is currently the only other choreographer experimenting along the same lines as Klunchun.<sup>38</sup> In Phnom Penh, pioneering artists such as Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and her Khmer Arts company have created modernised classical Cambodian performances such as her acclaimed Khmer *Othello*, named *Samrithechak* (2000), and the Khmer *Magic Flute* entitled *Pamina Devi* (2006). She has also updated traditional narratives such as *The Lives of Giants* (2010), *Neang Nak* (2012) and *A Bend in The River* (2013). Much of the classical Cambodian aesthetics and vocabulary in Shapiro's choreographies are retained, with reorganised and recomposed movements and gestures accompanied by new Cambodian music compositions. She also emphasises the modern staging technologies of the proscenium arch, together with accomplished light and sound design.<sup>39</sup> However, the dance performances of Amrita Performing Arts present a different perspective by not adhering so closely to classical principles. In watching ambiguous, open and fluid performances such as *Source/Primate* and *Black and White*, local audiences in Bangkok and Phnom Penh are introduced to new ways of performance viewing where they are free to process and interpret the dances based on their own embodied experiences.

Ranci re also discusses "Plato's opposition between *choros* and theatre" where Plato suggests replacing the theatre (drama) audience who is passive with a "choreographic community", "where no one remains a static spectator, where everyone must move in accordance with the community rhythm" (2009, 5.

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<sup>38</sup> Chompee also recently experimented with the classical Khon character and narratives of Hanuman and other Ramayana monkeys in *18 Monkeys* (2010) that hybridises the classical vocabulary with balletic aesthetics and forms.

<sup>39</sup> One could certainly compare Shapiro's dance dramas to those of Malaysian Azanin Ahmad (in Chapter 1) where both choreographers are highly committed to retaining classical aesthetics, vocabulary and narratives in their performances that hint at new adaptations and inventions of tradition.

Emphasis in original). According to Plato, the ideal audience is choreographed together with the choreography on stage so that they become physically active and on the move. While actual physical mobilisation of audience from their seats – where they move with the dance performance – may not be possible all the time, except in particular shows of active audience participation, there may be another way to move *to* the dance. In contemplating the Greek origins of the word “choreography”, Susan Leigh Foster writes of how an early incarnation of the word, “chorography” was also associated with a sub-discipline of geography. Developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Foster explains that chorography was popular in English geography as a mapping practice that described and analysed the locale’s terrain and its inhabitants (2011, 17). The intersecting ideas of organising and mapping directions and pathways through space and time with considerations for the social and cultural concepts in dance choreography and geographical “chorography” could extend the implications for a “choreographic community” in the dance audience. The choreographic modernities of reconfigured movements, gestures and ensemble identities in *Source/Primate* and *Black and White* can then be understood to choreograph the audience into new ways of experiencing and encountering dance. The static audience members who are seated in a particular locale in the auditorium are regrouped or ‘remapped’ as “emancipated spectators” as they move *with* the dancers through kinesthetic and affective senses.

The occurrence of choreographic modernities has implications for the classical performer as well. Learning new movement vocabulary stemming from their classical base, new modes of expressions from within or even the ‘dividuality’ of the partible performer require an exploration into individuated as well as assemblage multiplicities. The features of bodies, combinations of bodies, modes of expression, utterances and signification of the multiplicity of each dancer must first be recognised by the performer herself. The dancer’s existing bodily training and aesthetic vocabulary as part of his own plurality can be utilised to produce more creative multiplicities via improvisation and the introduction of new

techniques. What is perhaps even more useful is the idea of the individual either as a part of, or as the alternative partible notion of an assemblage.

Returning to the *Source/Primate* ensemble, dancers in the 'running monkeys' scene were assigned specific movements and roles that were unique to them. While they execute their own movements and roles, they also have to be aware that they are part of a larger *mise en scène*. Each dancer's choreography says as much about the individual's virtuosity and character as their contribution in a varied and diverse ensemble. Hence an individual body's multiplicity contributes to an assemblage of even more multiplicities. One could say that to be part of an ensemble, there is a need for a kind of self-awareness, an emergent self-identity in relation to its function and role to the larger collective in emergence.

### **Situated Choreographic Modernities**

The choreographic modernity of new assemblages that signal emergent ensemble identities on stage in *Source/Primate* and *Black and White* occur because of their history and past traditions. It is a resourceful modernising strategy where classical dancers do not have to abandon or break away entirely from their traditional training to enter into other kinds of choreographies. *Source/Primate*, for instance, shows a continuation or migration of gestures from the classical monkey to the present 'becomings-monkey'. The Lakhon Kaol *sua* has its origins in their 'natural cousins', past monkey artists and masters drawing inspiration from the Angkor bas-reliefs of Ramayana monkeys in battle and other scenes. Choreographer Phuon has remarked that *Source/Primate* was about "[g]oing back to the origins of the monkey dance, which is what the first [classical] masters did: They looked at gibbons, at macaques and came up with all the movements they do in the masked dances" (Vachon and Kuch 2011, 10). The Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia (1975-1979) saw the loss of between 80 and 90 percent of the country's performing artists (Turnbull 2006). Efforts to recover and restore many forms of traditional Khmer arts by surviving masters entailed not only turning to Angkor stone bass reliefs but in some cases studying particular

'original' sources, such as observing monkeys in the wild, in re-establishing Lakhon Kaol monkey movements and dances.

One of the oldest surviving Lakhon Kaol troupe in Cambodia, the Svay Andet troupe, is located in the Kandal province, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh city (Phim and Thomson 1999, 57). Some Lakhon Kaol masters in this troupe survived the Khmer Rouge genocide and it is said that the Svay Andet troupe produces some of the best *sua* performers and style of performance in the country, even to the present day. It could be said that the migrations of the Lakhon Kaol monkey are cyclical journeys of 'initial' origins derived from monkeys in the wild and Angkor stone carvings to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only to be disrupted by the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 70s. It was then revived by surviving monkey masters in the 80s and 90s by re-examining the form once again through sculptures and monkeys in their wild habitats.

Other than *Source/Primate* being a new 'destination' for the migration of the *sua* gestures and characterisations, it is significantly local in its attempt at modernising traditional conventions. By gradual transformations, from emphasis on physical and representational performances to individual but diverse affective expressions that are grounded in familiar classical vocabulary, the Amrita dancers are enabled to develop new and experimental choreographic styles and identities.

These 'located' modernities exemplified by different developing Thai and Cambodian dance practices resonate with what Friedman, citing Subrahmanyam, describes as "global and conjunctural" modernities (2006, 435). This means that even though multiple or separate modernities happen in different locations with different contexts, these phenomena are not mutually exclusive but linked in a variety of ways historically, socially, culturally and politically. Nonetheless Friedman suggests that despite "multidirectional links" between different modernities, each will still evolve and develop separately according to the "indigenizations of its own locations" (2006, 435).

As Friedman remarks, there are “different kinds of aesthetic innovation linked to different modernities around the world and through time” (2006, 488). As the Thai and Cambodian dancers continue to work with foreign choreographers and come into contact with different cultural and aesthetic contexts from a global perspective, their located modernities will continually grow with “global and conjunctural” features. The next chapter takes into consideration local as well as international contexts and perspectives that may have implications on the dancers’ “located modernities” as they innovate and experiment even further away from their classical canons.

## CHAPTER 5

### DANCING FROM JETLAG TO BODY REGIMES

#### **Introduction**

You wake with a start at three in the morning and for a moment in the darkness you are not sure exactly where you are. You then experience hunger pangs. You get up and eat; the meal looks like dinner even though you had that earlier on. You go back to bed about an hour later and the next thing you know, you wake up past noon but it feels like it's only seven in the morning. Your powers of concentration are poor. Thoughts drift in and out of your mind. It is as if your thoughts are formed in mid-sentence, with beginnings or endings but never both. So you try again every time a 'mid-thought' is disrupted. When you can finally focus on pinning down complete thoughts or penning whole sentences, you do so in the wee hours of the morning. Day has become night and night has become day. You are suffering from jet lag.

Our bodies are regulated by an internal rhythm that determines cycles of sleep and wakefulness over a 24-hour period. It is an 'internal timing system,' which follows what is medically known as a "circadian rhythm." This rhythm governs our body's consciousness, physical and mental activity – work, participation in social activity, focusing on the task at hand, and eventually winding down to relax and ultimately sleep. In the midst of our activities the circadian rhythm also helps to signal hunger, thirst and exhaustion (Barion 2011, 423). When this rhythm is interrupted, the daily routine of our bodily functions is disrupted as well. One way it is interrupted is when we experience "a desynchronization of the body's circadian system as the normal diurnal rhythm is out of harmony with the new local time" (Reilly 2005, 368). Symptoms of this "desynchronization" range from not being able to sleep at the correct local time of night and temporary disorientation, to poor mental concentration, increased headaches, and irritability (Ibid.). These symptoms are better known to us as jet lag.

Perhaps this “desynchronization” happens as air travellers are trapped 37,000 feet (11,300m) in the air, suspended from their usual activity, leading to disruption of their regular rhythm. The airplane as a non-place where passengers are transported from point to point of activity, with an ‘empty’ in-between where the end promises productive activity again (Auge 1995, 77), suggests the whiling of time and nonproductive activity. Alphonso Lingis describes the experience of travelling from Baltimore to Ulaanbaatar: changing planes, transiting in different airports, and traveling at a speed of 980km while feeling stationary in the plane, only to have “the thrill ... anesthetized in passenger jetliners” (2011, 11). He recounts:

There are no rhythms in the cabin of the transcontinental jetliner and in your body the seat position in which you are buckled builds up muscle tensions that cannot be released. ... your mind sucks on trivial and inconsequential distractions. You watch the in-flight movie or read a light novel. The 12,250 kilometres to Mongolia are eighteen hours of twitchy urges to do something and a heavy lethargy smothering those urges. What does this tell us about movement and modernity – what does it tell us about dance...

(2011,12)

There are two interlinked arguments here that would shed light on Lingis’ question of movement, dance and modernity. Firstly, there is Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis that movement, kinetics and mobility are all states of modernity, that “modernity is a pure ‘being-toward-movement’ ” ([1989] 2009, 6). He also initially qualifies this by stating:

... in order to be continuously active as progressive beings man should overcome all the conditions where his movement is reduced, where he has come to a halt, where he lost his freedom and where he is pitifully fixed.

([1989] 2009, 5)

Efficient and speedy transcontinental air travel exemplifies modernity as high-powered aircraft, the products of super-advanced aeronautical engineering, enable easy and rapid mobility across the globe. The advances of modern air travel mean that we are able to traverse long distances, say between London and Phnom Penh, at great speed, which allows for shorter travel time and more frequent trips. Yet Lingis draws our attention to what happens to us, the passengers, *inside* the great cruising aircraft. We are forcibly seated and “buckled”, immobile for long periods.

Freedom is lost as we are generally fixed to our seats in the non-place of the aircraft, momentarily as it were. The contradiction here is that for the sake of greater mobility, all the way from Phnom Penh to London, we give up our very own movement (our ‘being-toward-movement’) that in the first place is supposed to define our modernity.

Secondly, dance philosopher André Lepecki expands on Sloterdijk’s theory of movement as modernity by qualifying that “[d]ance accesses modernity by its increased ontological alignment with movement as the spectacle of modernity’s being” (2006, 7). In other words, movement as dance is an expression of modernity. Thus the conceptual links between movement, modernity and dance are established where dance as movement is considered an art of modernity (Lepecki 2006b, 18). Conversely, where is dance situated in Lingis’s conditions of a jetliner interior with immobility, non-movement and non-rhythm? Dance as a kinetic activity seems to be the antithesis of the state of suspended animation in the modern exemplar of transcontinental flight. In his interrogation with the ‘outer limit’ definitions of dance in *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki examines experimental choreographies that exhibit traits of ‘non-movement’ such as stillness, falling, stumbling and horizontal movements (2006a, 4). He considers in great detail the effects of stillness, or still acts, as a way of understanding dance and its politics by “the deployment of different ways of slowing down movement and time” (2006a, 15). Lepecki’s argument for stillness-as-dance provides alternative perspective on examining contemporary dance, and challenges the relationship between modernity-as-movement and movement-as-dance.

In a further complication, Lepecki writes of modernity as a Western project where dance “pursues its own autonomy as an art form, it does so in tandem with the consolidation of that major project of the West known as modernity” (2006a, 7). This is reinforced by his critical analyses of ‘non-movement’ dances, which consist solely of Euro-American case studies by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Jerome Bel, Juan Domnigeuz, Xavier Le Roy, Vera Mantero, Trisha Brown, La Ribot and William



Pope. L.<sup>40</sup> This then begs the question of the relationship between movement, dance and modernity outside the West. As I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters, located and conjunctural modernities are important when examining the choreographies of Thai and Cambodian dancers. While Sloterdijk stresses globalising influences ([1989] 2009, 3) in his conceptualisation of modernity as “movement-toward-being” I also propose that there are different located ‘movements-as-modernities’ influenced by cultural, social, aesthetic and political specificities. And, while Lepecki turns to stillness and still acts to examine dance and modernity, I argue for a study of “desynchronization” or rhythmic disruption and its modernising factors on dance – of different ‘movements-as-modernities – experienced by the performers of Amrita and Pichet Klunchun Dance Company. Where Lepecki proposes “ways of slowing down movement and time”, I counter with how conflicting movements and temporalities of rhythms can contribute to experimental choreographies.

### **Learning and Rehearsing Disruptions**

The proliferation of international arts and performance festivals affords growing work opportunities for dancers, but in turn demands increasing distance travel by long-haul flights. The Phnom Penh-based Amrita dancers belong to the ever-growing community of such travelling artists taking full advantage of festival opportunities across the globe. In 2009, Amrita dancer Phon Sopheap flew with three fellow Cambodian dancers to Toronto, Canada, to work with choreographer Peter Chin for six weeks. This was followed by a two-week performance tour of Western Canada. Then Phon flew to Florida to participate in a dance workshop with fellow Cambodian dancers Chey Chankethya (Kethya) and Chumvan Sodhachiv (Belle) for a further four weeks. Together, Phon, Kethya and Belle also flew to New Delhi that year to perform *Khmeropedies I & II*. In 2010 they performed *Khmeropedies I & II* in Hong Kong, Laos, China and Singapore over three weeks, following which, they also performed in the United States and Netherlands.

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<sup>40</sup> While they do come from and locate themselves in the West, the group of dancers studied by Lepecki is by no means socioculturally and sociopolitically homogenous as Lepecki also examines different cultural and identity politics that emerge from their works. Specifically, Lepecki analyses post-colonial discourses against African-American visual artist Pope.L’s performance on the hegemony neo-colonial politics (2006, 87-105), followed by his examination of Portuguese dancer Vera Mantero dancing the “racialised Other” of a past colonial empire (2006, 106-122).

Phon and his fellow dancers have extensive experiences of jet lag as a result of their multiple transcontinental travels. “It is difficult for the first two days when I arrive home in Phnom Penh. I cannot sleep at night and then I am sleepy and have no energy during the day. Everything is upside down,” says Phon. Belle also says that she always falls sick upon returning home after long haul flights. “I will get fever and cold and headaches. It is hard to concentrate on my work at home, but we should get used to it.” The dancer’s circadian rhythm is shaken and disrupted as they dance at 8pm on a New York stage when their internal body chemistry signals that they should be waking up for breakfast in Phnom Penh where it is 7am. The effects of jet lag from west to east flights are greater than the in other direction, with higher degrees of sleeplessness, physical and mental fatigue (Barion 2011, 432; Pipe 2011, 63; Reilly et al 2005, 371). So it could be that Amrita dancers who have just returned from performing in London are wide awake at 2.30 in the morning in Phnom Penh. Their bodies are primed for a performance at 7.30pm London time, about 10,000km west of them.

Jet lag becomes a regular feature, a recurring inconvenience, irritant, malaise or malady. The highly tuned dancer’s body perhaps feels the disorientating effects of desynchronisation more keenly than other travellers. Although dancers are generally in their physical prime, they do not escape the effects of jet lag, as illustrated in the brief accounts above. Not only that, their rhythms are also disrupted in other ways through encountering foreign locations, performance venues, rehearsal studios, work methods, and contending with different social and cultural *habitus*. Yet they carry out their performances while dealing with clashing social, cultural and biological rhythms. One way to re-orientate themselves or ballast themselves in their shaken and disrupted situations is through performance. For an hour or so, the dancers experience familiar rhythms, gestures and movements as they confidently perform their intended dance piece for that particular moment in time. On the other hand, their so-called familiar dance rhythms and movements were also alien at some point in the past as they gradually learned and embodied them through rehearsals. Nevertheless, the Amrita dancers find ways of dealing with and adapting to different

discombobulating situations and experiences. These disruptions and desynchronisations constitute yet another kind of modernity in their performing lives in that they are constantly encountering new body techniques, different rehearsal systems and unfamiliar performance modes in their bid for choreographic experimentation and innovation. In the following two sections, I examine the effects of these 'modern' disruptions and desynchronisations on the Amrita dancers' choreographic and aesthetic experimentations.

The Amrita dancers experience different kinds of physical disorientation on- and off-stage as they work with choreographers who bring with them particular body techniques and dance styles. Generally, foreign choreographers will draw on the classical training and experience of the Amrita dancers, employing their traditional vocabulary to create new choreographies. For example, Phuon's choreographies for *Khmeropedies I & II* benefitted greatly from Phon's Lakhon Kaol training (as highlighted in previous chapters), and Belle and Kethya's mastery of the all-female Lakhon Luong or Robam Kbach Boran.

On the other hand, dancers like Phon, Belle and Kethya do not always rely on their classical training to integrate their practice into the choreographic strategies and methods of the foreign dancemakers. Their familiar physical vocabularies and classical dance rhythms sometimes have to be adjusted in more radical ways for the sake of experimental choreography. Phuon's *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* is such a consideration. It might have been premised on the stable and consistent classical *sua* or monkey training, but the more fluid nature of the movements and gestures of natural monkeys (discussed in Chapter 4) presented initial physical challenges for the Amrita dancers.

The beautifully stylised monkey types in the classical Cambodian oeuvre, while partly derived from the behaviour of the animals, are far from 'natural'. Bodies are flattened, directions are profiled either left or right, movements are measured and exaggerated, while certain gestures are visibly 'human' in their upright movements and positions. A perfect, ninety-degree out-turn of the pelvis is

necessary. Hyper extension of the wrist with curved fingers, bending to almost touch the upper arm, are considered imperative. Young students of ages six to nine years old spend almost every morning of their dance training perfecting the outturn and flexible outstretched palm to painful results. The argument is that at that age, their bones are 'malleable' enough to bend and yield to the desired shapes without causing permanent damage. By the age of 16, the dancers would have been shaped to the ideal Lakhon Kaol body.

In *Source/Primate* this ideal classical Cambodian dance body was bent and moulded otherwise to make way for new physical vocabularies. From a two-dimensional positional and posturing dance inspired by ancient Khmer bas reliefs, shadow puppetry and paintings, the *Source/Primate* dancers had to adopt the more three-dimensional shapes of 'actual' monkeys and apes. The dancers were learning new muscular movement and skeletal postures that were vastly different to their classical training. The highly systematic classical training yields a stylised, dancierly 'monkey body' according to a limited range of poses and movements. The explosion of wild monkey movements demanded new joint articulations, flexes, and muscle tensions that countered the physical range of the classical monkey. Most of the *Source/Primate* dancers were in their early to mid-twenties and their physical agility and stamina enabled them to rehearse these fast-paced and rigorous dance sequences. Physical flexibility and suppleness was also imperative, in order to learn the precise positions and postures of the multiple species of monkeys, as opposed to the three classical varieties already discussed.

Sore muscles, strained ligaments, ankle twists, and cramps became more and more common. In fact several dancers sustained serious injuries of bruised and swollen knees, and twisted ankles. Dance injuries such as inflamed, swollen ankles also took longer to heal due to a lack of support sports bandages. Phnom Penh pharmacies and clinics only carry the most basic athletic protective gear. Some of the other dancers offered home and folk remedies of liniment rubs usually prescribed for injuries that occur during classical training. Due to the impactful landing from forceful jumps, and constant running on all four limbs, the traditional

liniments did not seem to be effective. Jumping and landing in classical Cambodian dance is softer, and happens at different angles to those explored by Phuon. The 'classical' ankle had little conditioning for the new movements: three weeks of radically different physical orientation in the *Source/Primate* workshop, versus ten years of classical physical conditioning.

When she was in Bangkok, Phuon bought protective dance belts for the all-male *Source/Primate* ensemble. The dancers had never had to wear such protective gear for dance before. As physically demanding as the classical Cambodian dance is, the speedy and energetic primate movements and gestures in *Source/Primate* demanded for proper, protective support. The issue of what is 'proper' comes into question here. Dance belts are necessary and 'proper' for western genres of dance such as ballet, but not for classical Cambodian dance. The Cambodian dancers needed appropriate gear dictated by what was considered injurious in more experimental ways of dancing.

Just as the *Source/Primate* dancers had to reshape their classical vocabulary to shape new ones for performance, the dancers in Arco Renz's *Crack* (2011) had to unlearn their classical rhythms and movements to accommodate entirely different ways of producing gestures. In one rehearsal I observed, Renz had introduced movement exercises focusing on breath work. Different degrees of inhalations and exhalations would lead to bodily expressions of varying force and strength. In the rehearsal I observed, the Amrita dancers stood in a circle to focus on their breath work for more than an hour. In the course of the *Crack* workshops, Renz utilised this movement-with-breath method for the dancers to discover and produce new physical vocabulary. Dancers were first instructed to focus on particular classical gestures and stances. They then learned to 'disrupt' 'dismantle' or 'deform' the classical gesture while practising Renz's system of movement-with-breath. For instance, the dancer might begin with the classical hand gesture of flexed palms and rigid upturned fingers. With breath intakes and exhalations of varying intensities, the dancer was encouraged to develop the hand gesture through the direct physical responses resulting from the breathing. A sharp exhalation of the breath might cause

the arm to extend swiftly and the rigid upturned fingers to splay open. The next intake of breath would then determine the next movement and gesture of the arm, until a series of movements and gestures are produced through conscious control of the dancer's breath. This would ultimately provide a physical basis for the performance itself, where dancers created jerky and spasmodic movements and gestures that I will elaborate in the next section.

This manipulation of gestures and movements through intensities of the breath is a far cry from the classical Cambodian warm-up and training routine of systematic body conditioning with a stable set of gestures and steps. Firstly, as discussed earlier, Lakhon Kaol and Robam Kbach Boran dancers are equipped with a set of movements and gestures dictated by the Ramayana characters they are assigned, often on the basis of their physical build. In *Crack*, the dancers had to generate their own dance vocabulary from just a single classical gesture or movement. Secondly, the classical dancers rehearse and warm up to a consistent rhythm. While rhythms in classical performances may vary according to the dramatic pace in different scenes, the pace of change from one scene to another is often gradual. The rhythms of the *Crack* dancers were dependent on the intensities of their breaths: it could be slow one moment, and extremely fast in the next.

In- and out-breaths are not entirely dictated by particular rhythms or specific movement qualities of the classical vocabulary. During *Crack* rehearsals, the dancers had difficulty getting used to the emphasis on breathing, as they would initially try to move from their original classical gestures consciously instead of letting their breath affect them naturally or reflexively. Dancers such as Phon and Kethya initially remarked that they didn't quite understand the nature of the breath work introduced by Renz. They were also concerned that their jerky and spasmodic stuttering movements looked "ugly" and uncontrolled. Yet they persisted with the workshops and rehearsals as they were conscious that they were learning something new, quite literally beyond their 'comfort zones'. "It was hard in the beginning. We didn't understand why we made 'ugly' gesture and movements with this 'difficult'

way of breathing, but I now know that it is another way to move and dance. And, that the dance movements [in *Crack*] can be beautiful too,” explained Kethya.

### **Performing Desynchronisation**

The performance of *Crack* stands out among Amrita’s repertoire of experimental dances. It exhibits little of the classical vocabulary, an aesthetic strength the dancers had thus far relied on. Generally, the *Crack* physical vocabulary consists of a series of tense contractions, alternating with outbursts of release, which occur at different speeds throughout the dancers’ entire bodies. The initial half of the performance displays six individual dancers going through their jerky movements in particular spots, covering very little distance. As the performance progresses, the dancers group and disperse intermittently as they move all round the stage in actions of exploring and searching. There are also two female solos within the group choreographies that alternately merge static, spasmodic and ambling movements and gestures. The audience may or may not be able to identify traces of classical Khmer gestures and movements. These moments are scattered throughout *Crack*, but they are fleeting.

The performance begins in darkness with the fading in of light at a very slow pace. The audience can just make out the silhouette of three female dancers standing in a row holding various classical Cambodian poses and positions. They move slowly and they are not in sync with each other. They then begin to undulate their torsos as if convulsing in slow motion while their hands seem to make an effort of shaping the conventional classical Cambodian flexed palms gesture. These tense, slow, undulating movements with half-formed classical hand positions are sustained for a long period, until a different rhythm sets into their bodies. Then the dancers move in a slightly more agitated state, and their movements and gestures become jerky and change in fast fits and spurts. They seem to be reaching for something with great effort, their arms tense, muscles contracted, ankles flexed. Suddenly the tension is released, with a swift upward wave of the hand or an arm sharply thrust forward. Then the arms jerk again, slowing reaching for/grabbing at something.

Over time, the tension-release cycles quicken as the dancers advance slowly down stage. Once they reach a high level of corporeal intensity, they release the tension and walk back to their start positions upstage to begin the entire process over again. This sequence is then repeated by three male dancers, but with even greater intensity in their bodies and stances. The jerky movements and gestures that seem to exhibit half-formed or even deformed classical gestures become faster and stronger with their outstretched arms, undulating torsos and flexed feet. The male dancers' outbursts of energy and physical spurts also grow in force, as if they are going into epileptic fits.

The entire *Crack* performance is accompanied by an electronic soundscape that features whirs, clicks, beeps, and pings that are sometimes rhythmic, and at other times cacophonous and mechanistic. As the soundscape progresses, distorted and stuttering human vocals in an unintelligible language begin to blend in and out. The light design that gradually illuminates the dancers is also kept very dim, giving the impression that they are dancing in darkness. Finally, a highly reflective dance mat on which the dancers move give the impression they are floating in a sea of black. The result of this tense yet mesmerising dance sequence suggests the dancers moving in desynchronised rhythms.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the powers of 'generative subtraction' as proposed by Gilles Deleuze, in his article 'One Less Manifesto', to aid my examination of rhythm and its effects of 'creative variations' (1997, 240) on experimental choreographies. In one section of the article, Deleuze writes on the positive impact of gestures on the state of continuous creativity and affective powers of a performance. To do this, Deleuze recommends "constant obstruction" to movements and gestures in a performance where they are in "perpetual and positive imbalance" ([1979] 1997b, 248). The dance sequence discussed above exhibits the disruptive qualities that Deleuze writes about: a desynchronised rhythm produces "constant obstruction" in the movements and gestures. Deleuze goes on to explain that gestures are "deformed by modifications of speed" where the gestures are "never repeated without obtaining different characteristics of time" ([1979]



1997b, 249). In other words, a desynchronised rhythm in the dancers' bodies can result in awkward and spasmodic movements that vary in speeds as evidenced in the *Crack* sequence above. More importantly, these unfamiliar sharp and awkward movements produce a different effect in the performance to the conventional representational modes of classical performance.

Together with their movements, the dancers seem disorientated in the black, empty space, their bodies thrashing in chaos. The gradually increasing volume of the soundscape and the dancers' suspension in the vacuum-like, non-place of the stage design contribute further to the sense of discombobulation. It brings to mind Lingis's description of being suspended in the middle of nowhere in a jetliner as the passenger travels from one point to another. Also, the disjointed and spasmodic movements could be read as an embodiment of jetlag, as physically experienced in movement. On the other hand, the Amrita dancers' movements in *Crack* could also reflect their discordant and turbulent processes of artistic development beyond their classical conventions, as discussed earlier. There is no clear storyline in *Crack*, which instead privileges the expression of affects over storytelling. As a performance, *Crack* constitutes choreographic modernity for the Amrita dancers in their exploration of non-linear narratives, non-representational and affective performances.

### **Stammering Towards a Minor Dance**

In *Crack*, the audience sees only hints of classical gestures in the dancers' bodies and limbs; more significant is that how the dancers affect the audience corporeally and emotionally more than what is said through the movements. These gestural traces are not only fleeting and fluctuating but they also seem "deformed" or partially formed before the dancers transform constantly into other gestures or bodily silhouettes. The *Crack* dancers produce physical and as well visual tension in their articulation of the classical vocabulary, only to rupture these movements into different gestures: they physically stammer and stutter as if they are deforming their classical gestures. In fact they 'stammer' and 'stutter' their very classical gestures so that they are never fully realised. In this section, I argue that, as with the creative potential Deleuze outlines in his concept of 'generative subtraction', the positive

qualities of disrupted rhythms and obstructed, stuttered movements can result in creative choreographic experimentation.

In 'One Less Manifesto', Deleuze likens linguistic stammering to gestural stuttering ([1979] 1997b, 249) – what he describes as “obstructions on gestures” ([1979] 1997b, 248) – as ways of producing affective performances on stage. In Deleuze’s essay ‘He Stuttered’, the philosopher continues his argument for a stuttering of language to “invent a *minor use* of the major language...to push language as a whole to its limit” (1997a, 109, 113. Emphasis in original). This “pushing language to its limit” and ‘minorisation’ of language or literature through stuttering has political implications that are more fully dealt with in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986), co-written with Felix Guattari. There, Deleuze and Guattari write that minor literature is born from a major language (1986, 16). They give the example of how Afro-Americans use the English language (1986, 17) producing slang, lingo and patois. On the other hand, Deleuze defines the minority as a group marginalised by the majority or the norm that is a “state of rule” (1997b, 254). More importantly Deleuze and Guattari explain that minor literature acts to *detritorialise* major literature (1986, 16). It does this by pushing the very limits of the usage of major literature, breaking the rules and boundaries of how a particular major literature is produced. Something new is born in place of the major, something that is creative in its constant act(s) of delimiting or destabilising the major or the norm.

Simon O’Sullivan identifies the characteristics of minor literature in the alternative practices of art (2006, 72). He cites the example of a major western art practice such as modernism, and counter-proposes feminist and post-colonial art as its minor practices. He then rationalises that such ‘minor art practices’ politically challenge the major Western aesthetic modernism as “modernity’s ‘other voice.’” Finally, he typifies artistic media such as painting as a major dimension of art practice, where minor art turns to other media in its expressions. Dance as an art form then stands to benefit from a parallel comparison to the concept of major-minor practices in order to examine a performance such as *Crack*. According to Deleuze (1997b, 255), the bodily stammering and stuttering nature of the

movements of the *Crack* dancers would suggest a collective, an assemblage, of alternative creativity of “becoming-minority”.

On a material level, Deleuze addresses the matter of style in the “minor uses” of language and gesture, where the style of “constant obstruction” of a major language or literature is through the very method of stuttering (1997a, 113; [1979] 1997b 249). This style of stuttering or stammering a major language then produces a “foreign language within language” (1997a, 113), which is creative as well as political. Choreographer Renz recounted to me how he had to contend with what he considered a major issue of the Amrita dancers’ almost reflexive use of their classical gestures in all their dance workshops with him. He explained, “I am trying to get through the [embodied] memory [of the dancers] to a new base”, and elaborated that he wanted to explore new choreography from the Cambodian dancers beyond their classical training. The *Crack* dancers in their style of gestural fits and starts created a new movement base that also stuttered and stammered the major or dominant classical Cambodian dance vocabulary to create a ‘minor dance’ that transgresses the classical form.

A ‘minor dance’ or “becoming-minority” through dance is political in *Crack*. The dancers move towards transgressing the hegemony of their own cultural practice of the dominant classical Cambodian vocabulary. They deterritorialise classical gestures in their stuttering and stammering to reterritorialise with other qualities of movements along with constant traces of “deformed” and half-formed classical gestures. The stuttering ‘minor dancers’ are presented with alternative aesthetic forms, away from the familiar classical convention that has defined their gestural and movement in their dance careers thus far. It must be emphasised however that processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation such as those discussed above do not stop once the dancers have learnt a new method. They experience varying degrees of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in their choreographic styles with every new artistic, social and cultural encounter. Again, that does not mean they entirely omit their classical practices in contemporary works. As I have stressed in other parts of the thesis, the Amrita dancers constantly

practise and perform their classical Lakhon Kaol and Robam Boran alongside emergent choreographic modernities as evidenced in *Crack*. Rather than completely deterritorialising and 'escaping' their classical training, new choreographic experiences allow for the continuous reterritorialisation and innovation of their classical dance practices. This forms a continuum between classical conventions and contemporary invention. Furthermore, historical and current socio-political and cultural practices locally and globally act on this classical-contemporary continuum to catalyse even more reterritorialisations. One way that wider socio-political and cultural practices can act on the classical-contemporary continuum is through the body.

### **The Modern (Dance) Body**

From disorientating long-haul air travel, with jet lag to boot, to unsettling and even injurious inventive dance and body techniques, the Amrita dancers expose themselves to the vicissitudes of modernity. The classical dancing body is remoulded for experimental and innovative choreographies, resulting in a modern dancing body. Even as we acknowledge the radical and even violent conditions to which the (dancing) body is subjected for the sake of modernity, there is cause to consider how different cultural practices and political regimes of power might impact the body through time. Indeed, as Foucault argued, the body is considered a site where various power relations are in operation, but it is also "marked by culture and 'speaks' of and to cultural practices, the self and history" (Thomas and Ahmed 2004, 7). More than that, it inhabits a set of everyday cultural, social and physical milieux that constitute the *habitus* of the social body (Bourdieu 1977).

At the outset, the strict nature of classical Khmer dance training under regimented masters is nothing new to classical artists, young and old, in the country. Even in the present, Cambodian performance historians Phim and Thompson write of a disciplined classical training where "[p]ractice is rigorous. Discipline is stern. Students go through a strenuous exercise routine to foster hyperextension and flexibility so central to the dance aesthetic ... To correct the placement of a foot lifted off the ground, [the teacher] will touch (or whack!) the dancer's foot with a

rattan stick” (1999, 46). Performers are traditionally sewn into the ornate and heavy costumes, which lack buttons, hooks, or other fastening devices. This practice remains to the present where performers prepare for three hours before a show, to be sewn up in their costumes. Once encased, the performers refrain from drinking or eating to avoid going to the toilet as they would have to be cut out from their costumes for that, and the classical performances may last another three to four hours, depending on the Reamker scenes they perform.

The road to artistic mastery is a long one for the Cambodian classical performers. It takes twelve years for a dancer to master Lakhon Kaol or Robam Kbach Boran professionally: six to master basic movements, and six more to perfect the finer points of performance, character development, and the spiritual precepts of the form (Phim and Thompson 1999, 44). Stories of glamour and glory amongst the royal Cambodian court dancers are also countered by those of mistreatment. Oral documentation on a Cambodian governor in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century revealed the mistreatment of his troupe of female dancers, from restrictions on personal freedom and fraternisation with the opposite sex, to meagre food rations (Phim and Thompson 1999, 40).

In the wider socio-cultural and political landscape of the country, the relatively young sovereign nation of Cambodia experienced upheaval and violence throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the apogee of national terror and tragedy helmed by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. A “reasonable estimate” (Tully 2006, 181) of the number of Cambodians who perished from exhaustion, starvation or execution, has been put at 1.7 million. Under the new regime, the country’s name was changed to Democratic Kampuchea. The city of Phnom Penh was largely evacuated, with city dwellers relocated to the countryside. Turning its back on Western urbanisation and modernity to create a new agrarian society, the country was transformed into “one large worksite, with collective agriculture and construction projects” (Ricklefs, et al 2010, 398). Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot was said to be enamoured of Mao Zedong’s, “Great Leap Forward” (1958-1961) (Tully, 2006, 180), which disastrously aimed at building an alternative agricultural economy through the formation of communes all

over rural China. Intellectuals, scientists, engineers and artists were “re-educated” in the countryside as the party deemed their roles to be no longer necessary. Farmers were favoured instead. Intellectualism was considered a threat to the point that, as Tully writes, “[the] wearing of spectacles was sufficient to brand one as an intellectual and therefore an enemy of the people” (2006, 184). Urban bodies and bodily hexis were forcibly reshaped into agrarian ones. The entire population was to be converted into agricultural labourers to produce rice, vegetables, fruits and domesticated animals. Extreme changes from intellectual to hard manual labour took their toll on city bodies. They broke down from exhaustion, malnutrition or starvation.

Cultural and aesthetic practices also came under attack under the Khmer Rouge, where 80 to 90 per cent of the country’s classical dance and music performers, and visual artists were killed in the name of rooting out bourgeois culture (Turnbull 2006, 133). According to Turnbull, “dancers attached to the Royal Palace or Royal University of Fine Arts and others closely associated with former regimes lived under constant threat of execution, often administered arbitrarily and with violence”. Dance bodies underwent drastic changes in forms, movements and rhythms – if not completely reshaped to perform digging, dredging, planting and harvesting activities. In place of the refined classical Khmer arts, the Khmer Rouge party encouraged mass revolutionary song-and-dance that praised the movement, not unlike the Maoist mass cultural performances meant to glorify the Cultural Revolution. Stylised and complex hand gestures and poses performing the mythical and magical characters were replaced by the performance of mass, militaristic formations of marches “walking in unison, arms swinging in rhythm with their legs – in choreographed linear and circular patterns” (Shapiro-Phim 2002, 179) for the cause of the revolution.

Several well-travelled stage performances have highlighted the atrocities of the period. Amrita’s documentary performance *Breaking the Silence* (2009) brought together interviews with Khmer Rouge members and survivors who were hoping for some kind of reconciliation or resolution by sharing their stories. Before that, Amrita

staged another docu-performance, *3 Years, 8 Months and 20 Days* (2006), which specifically recounted the hardships of urban people living in Khmer Rouge farms. The most widely travelled performance is Ong Keng Sen's *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2001) featuring stories of surviving Cambodian classical dance artists from the Pol Pot years.

The body constantly undergoes shaping and reshaping according to particular cultural performances or particular socio-political regimes. The illustrations above highlight the radical and often violent changes in specific Khmer or Cambodian body cultures. While the body conditioning experiences by the Amrita dancers in *Source/Primate* and *Crack* can be considered as a continuum to past body cultures, it is not my intention to insinuate that experiences of learning or training in different physical dance aesthetics are in any way comparable to the extremely violent and life-threatening experiences of body cultures by oppressive political regimes. The point here is to illustrate that the body experience numerous changes due to changing aesthetics, socio-politics, sociocultural norms where modernity becomes a driving force of these changes. The Amrita dancers continue to explore beyond their classical aesthetic practices, they undoubtedly experience varying demands on their bodies. The other main point is how these dancers embody new dance techniques have effects on how they create contemporary aesthetics, as discussed in the next section.

### **Locating Modernity in the Traditional**

In *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (2002) Alexander Laban Hinton notes that the Nazi and Khmer Rouge regimes rationalised genocide as being driven by “metanarratives of modernity” in the name of “progress, rationality, the elimination of the impure” (2002, 18). Hinton adds that the Khmer Rouge’s “utopian project of social engineering” was supposed to rebuild a new Cambodian society free of “contaminating” elements (Hinton 2002, 19) that included the urban and foreign (Western) ideologies and capitalism as embodied by the Phnom Penh city folk (Tully 2006, 178). The significance of this “new society” is that Pol Pot turned to an ancient civilisation, which was considered a bygone Golden

Age of Khmer or Cambodia. In looking for a 'pure' Cambodian modernity, Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge turned to the past. And, in this twisted bid for a local modernity, 1.7 million people lost their lives.

In addition, Susan Stanford Friedman contends that modernity:

involves a powerful vortex of historical conditions that coalesce to produce sharp ruptures from the past that range widely across various sectors of a given society. The velocity, acceleration, and dynamism of shattering change across a wide spectrum of societal institutions are key components of modernity as I see it – change that interweaves the cultural, economic, political, religious, familial, sexual, aesthetic, technological and so forth, and can move in both utopic and dystopic directions.

(2006, 433)

Her descriptions of modernity echo the cruel and violent period of the Khmer Rouge's rule, which marked an attempt to break away from Cambodia's fraught political and sociocultural histories of French colonization, followed by unstable relationships with neighbouring geopolitical powers such Vietnam and intervening neo-imperial American political and military forces. The extremely swift shift to agrarian policies, the execution of large numbers of "intellectuals" in favour of the farming citizen, turning to Angkor for a 'new' Cambodia, decimating traditional arts and culture to be replaced by mass cultural displays of discipline and subservience, all took place within a short period of four years.

There was a particular irony in looking to the past to build a 'new' and totally indigenous modern society, since the Golden Age of Angkor in 12<sup>th</sup> Century also produced many artistic and cultural forms that remain to the present day (Heywood 2008, 22). Yet, a majority of classical arts masters perished due to harsh living conditions or were executed during the Khmer Rouge rule. The contrast between the Angkor temple carvings of sensual figures, captured in equally sensuous mid-dance, as exemplars of an empire rich in arts, could not be greater when compared to the emaciated bodies and drawn faces of exhausted farmers executing military-like revolutionary song and dance for *Angkar*. Considered one of Democratic Kampuchea party's apparatus of submission and discipline, the *Angkar* or *angka* was a symbolic



all-seeing, all-knowing revolutionary organisation to which the Cambodians would submit, revere and fear (LeVine 2010, 38-39; Tyner 2009, 133).

While the Khmer Rouge's utopian new Cambodia quickly disintegrated into a dystopia of chaos, inhumanity and suffering, the idea of Friedman's argument to consider the "interplay of modernity and tradition within each location" (2006, 434) is present in this example. I do not for a moment suggest that the kinds of 'turbulent' conditions, afflictions, injuries, aches and pains of international travel, different dance style and bodily techniques experienced by the Amrita dancers could be paralleled with the savage and violent experiences in the Khmer Rouge regime. There is, however, a common point that these two circumstances share: the modern Cambodian bodies during the Khmer Rouge regime and the modern bodies of the Amrita dancers physicalise the idea of the new mixed with the old under conditions of rapid change, grounded in specific sociocultural and historical contexts and developments.

Returning to *Crack*, the "interplay" of the modern that is constantly haunted by the old persists as a theme throughout the performance: the trope of disorientation and disruptions leading to some kind of searching is sustained throughout. Later segments consist of various permutations of dancers seeking something whose identity is never quite articulated. From the stammering and stuttering dances, the six dancers then progress into other segments of the dance where they literally portray acts of searching and exploring. The abstract setting and unsettling soundscape suggest the dancers' search for stable grounds through their physical articulations. These physical articulations start off as a series of awkward and jarring gestures without the dancers travelling at all. As they proceed in their search, they travel and explore the vast empty space as if seeking a definite place or niche to ground them amidst their suspension in a vacuum. Yet they are always interrupted by the return of their jarring gesticulations.

In the final scene, a lone dancer – Kethya – is left on stage. This time there is a change in her demeanour and physical stance. Standing still and recovering her

breath from the prolonged periods of stammering, Kethya's face registers a calmness that the audience has not seen before this point. She then gives an assured nod with her head and slowly lowers herself on to the ground. Her movements here are measured as she rolls on the floor while articulating traces of classical hand and feet gestures. Kethya's body retains some of its undulating and jerky features. However, what was previously seen as violent physical fits seem now to be smoothed out by Kethya's careful control of her body. There is still tension in Kethya's movements, but the present intensity suggests deliberate and fluid flows of movements. There is a sense of composure as well as enjoyment registering on Kethya's face with the new dance qualities. The search for something has transformed to a pleasurable exploration that leads to a newfound confidence in the body. Gradually, she rises from the floor while trying new ways of moving. She is unhurried. Finally she takes in a long breath and slowly moves into a kneeling position, smiling and confidently staring out into the audience.

Kethya's dances into a kind of self-confidence and assuredness is reflected by a change in the soundscape. The industrial machine noise is replaced by an upbeat rap and hip-hop song that is vocalised in the Khmer language. Composed by rising Phnom Penh-based hip-hop artist 'Peanut' Phanna Nam, the song represents one of the current popular musical trends in the country. The American subcultures of hip-hop, rap and breakdancing have been appropriated by young Cambodian returnees from the United States and introduced to Cambodian youth who are always in search of new and trendy Western popular cultures. The distinctly Cambodian rap and hip-hop has even taken on aspects of youth activism in Phnom Penh: non-government organisation Tiny Toones uses breakdancing and hip-hop culture in their youth education and outreach programmes.<sup>41</sup>

Another distinct Khmer cultural feature is Kethya's final position. Although her solo exhibits varied and fluid movements that breaks from her classical

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<sup>41</sup> For further information on Tiny Toones, see Seth Mydans's news report 'U.S. Deportee Brings Street Dance to Street Boys of Cambodia' in <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/world/asia/30dancer.html> or visit the organisation's web site a <http://www.tinytoones.org/>.

vocabulary, with arched back and flexed open palms, she ends with a kneeling position that is associated with traditional Khmer cultural and religious practices signifying prayer, submission or respect. In as much as Kethya's search for a new and modern (and confident) way of moving and dancing involves the distortion and destruction of old rhythms and gestures, her minor dance of 'stammers' still contain traces of classical gestures. Friedman writes of these kinds of traditional traces as "the haunting of the old in the new, a return of the repressed occasioned by the ruthless forgetting of the past", which she contends is constitutive of modernity (2010, 478).

So, even through its stammering and stuttering toward the new, the Amrita dancers retain aspects of their past, and it is this particularly Khmer or Cambodian gestural past that produces creative choreographies that are distinctly local and even personal in their modernity. Through the disruptions and discombobulations of external modernising conditions, a certain balance and harmony is attained when the personal and cultural memories coexist with the new in *Crack*. In his notes in the programme brochure of the *Crack* premiere in Singapore, Arco Renz writes that the performance "presents a group of people who are about to start an action, a change, a relationship" who follow "Khmer sensibilities". He also writes of "occasional disturbances" as the performance unfolds, vacillating between new and persistently "atavistic" gestures and movements (Renz 2011). As a Deleuzoguattarian "becoming", the minor dance in *Crack* can be seen as a process of continuous transformation, in "generating new forms through a break with, but also utilisation of, the old" (O'Sullivan 2006, 73).

### **Vulnerability and Precarity**

The range of physical afflictions and 'turbulences' impacting bodies under the Khmer Rouge regime bodies and, in radically different ways, the bodies of the Amrita dancers, suggest varying degrees of corporeal frailty and vulnerability that are wrapped up with the name and nature of modernity. Modernity in its breadth of technological, economic, cultural, social and political aspects acts on our bodies to make them better, fitter, stronger, faster, more supple, more attractive, more agile,

more productive, and even more obedient. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler writes specifically on the effects of a political life on the body, but there are insights we can extrapolate from her arguments in considering the wider perspective of the physical vulnerabilities of modernity and modern living:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever our own. The body has its invariably public dimension.

(2006, 26)

Our bodies are indeed never just our own as the Foucauldean regime of powers, though they can be *empowering*, may also act on, mould, re-shape, damage and ultimately destroy them to fit sociocultural and political norms mandated by dominant rhetorics. The Khmer Rouge took ownership of the Cambodian bodies re-shaped for agricultural production, and that would in turn be the very emblem of the ideal national body. Different publics act upon and claim particular aspects of the performing bodies of the Amrita dancers. For instance, festival programmers, choreographers and their audiences demand of their bodies' aesthetic and cultural bearing, and, their classical masters, state ministry and students claim their bodies' potential and material knowledge and experience as well as their bodies as sociocultural capital.

Under the globalised conditions of neo-liberal capitalism, "precarity" extends "vulnerability" to take on yet further ramifications in the susceptibility of the body to market forces in international capital, trade and labour flows. Artistic practice is just as bound up with these market forces, as it continues to participate in the globalising flows that materialize in all sorts of festivals, biennales, and so on. In a special edition of *The Drama Review* on precarity and performance, issue editors Ridout and Schneider define the phenomenon as "life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past. ... Life and work, and their dependence upon one another, are often imagined as increasingly precarious, their futures shadowed by pervasive terror as well as everyday anxieties about work" (2012, 5).

While the Amrita dancers enjoy a high degree of international exposure, they are also vulnerable to the volatility of the international arts market. They are dependent on foreign commissions, funding and financial undertakings. These artistic decisions can often seem to contain a degree of arbitrariness, based as they are on the complex interactions of the personal tastes and politics of artistic directors and programmers, consumption trends of theatre and dance audiences worldwide, and economic policies as well state politics with regards to arts funding.

As a non-profit organisation in Phnom Penh with registered non-profit status in the US, the Amrita Performing Arts organisation constantly depends on international funding to finance their works. They are unique in that, their dancers work and collaborate with a wide range of foreign choreographers, and do not have an artistic director of their own. Operating on the concept of 'pick-up choreographers' instead of the conventional model of 'pick-up dancers' (where choreographers recruit dancers for specific projects), Amrita is dependent on the kinds of funding that comes with and from the invited choreographers. On different occasions these foreign choreographers may come into an Amrita project armed with a network of funding opportunities – or not.

*Crack*, for instance, was commissioned and funded by the Singapore Arts Festival with extra support from the German cultural institute Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia and The Flemish Authorities, as German-born choreographer Arco Renz's dance company kobalt works is based in Brussels, Belgium. Since its premiere in Singapore, *Crack's* tours to Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Netherlands received further support from these two institutions in varying forms, from air travel grants to venue sponsorships.

Other projects run the risk of stalling. Emmanuèle Phuon's *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* began workshops in August 2011 with a simple work-in-progress performance in Phnom Penh then. Due to lack of funding, further development and completion of the piece only took place in February 2013, once it was slated for a

high-profile premiere in New York in April of that year. This performance became part of a special Cambodian multi-disciplinary festival, 'Season of Cambodia', which featured contemporary as well as traditional visual arts, music, dance and theatre performances.<sup>42</sup>

### **Life As Usual**

The artistic lives and livelihoods of the Amrita dancers are no less uncertain and precarious in widening their classical performance experiences to more experimental works. They are exposed to "precarity" from the personal and bodily experiences of jetlag and dance injuries, to the global institutional and public dictates of fluctuating financial funding, cultural tastes and aesthetic trends. Yet Ridout and Schneider qualify that "precarity" is life in capitalism *as usual* (2012, 7. Emphasis in original):

The secure "past" upon which a future had once been balanced turns out not to have been a very deep past, after all, but more a brief respite from precarity that is basic to capitalism as such.

(2012, 7)

What happens when the past does not seem as secure, regardless of capitalist notions? Closer inspection of the Amrita dancers' situation perceived as precarious in today's globalised arts market may reveal another perspective when examined against the country's local socioeconomic, cultural and political history at large.

The Khmer Rouge regime ended its rule in 1979, leaving Cambodia impoverished in many aspects: economic as well as social and cultural structures were left in ruin. Aside from losing 90 per cent of the country's classical arts masters and their aesthetic legacies, the Khmer Rouge radically changed the country's economic activities with its socioeconomic demographics, along with banning traditional sociocultural and communal practices, and religious beliefs (Ledgerwood, Ebihara and Mortland 1994, 12-14). Casting further back, Cambodia was already in

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<sup>42</sup> For more information on 'Season of Cambodia' in New York, see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nycarts/season-of-cambodia-ancien\\_b\\_3037871.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nycarts/season-of-cambodia-ancien_b_3037871.html), and <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/arts/dance/season-of-cambodia-dance-festival-in-new-york.html>. The festival also has web site: <http://seasonofcambodia.org/about-soc/>.

the throes of internal political upheavals and civil unrest following independence from the French colonial government. From 1955 to 1970, Cambodia maintained an ineffective parliamentary democracy that was manipulated by former king Norodom Sihanouk. He was then overthrown in a coup by his own prime minister Lon Nol who was quickly succeeded by the Communist Khmer Rouge party in 1975 (Ricklefs et al 2010, 355).

Unstable democracy, civil unrest, internal coups and finally a massive genocide marked Cambodia's modern history for about 20 years until the end of Khmer Rouge rule. The road to economic, social, cultural and even political recovery since then had been equally tumultuous, but cities and towns were repopulated and government and economic institutions were gradually reestablished. Economic recovery during the 1980s was still hampered by an ongoing civil war between factional resistance armies against the Phnom Penh administration. 150,000 Cambodian refugees resettled in the United States in 1992, with an additional 70,000 resettling in France, Australia, Canada and Spain (Ledgerwood, Ebihara and Mortland 1994, 16-18).

It was only in 2006 that Cambodia established its national stock exchange, the Cambodian Securities Exchange. The London Stock Exchange has a history that can be traced back to 1571; the New York Stock Exchange was established in 1792; the Paris Bourse found a permanent location in 1826; and the Shanghai Stock Exchange listed its first shares in 1866, while Tokyo Stock Exchange started trading in 1878. The point here is that while the Amrita dancers may experience the ups and downs of a volatile global arts market, the Cambodian population at large has experienced more recent precariousness in all areas of their lives: economic, political, cultural and social. Presently, aggressive but uneven economic growth in the country has also reshaped the socio-economic structures and networks as well as cultural practices. The World Bank reports that Cambodia's poverty rate in 2007 was at 30 per cent of the population where one in three Cambodians subsisted on US\$1.25 a day (Finch 2009, [www.phnompenhpost.com](http://www.phnompenhpost.com)).

Some of the younger Amrita dancers, who recently graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts in classical dance, eke out hand-to-mouth existences where they sometimes have to borrow US\$5 from friends to buy petrol for their motorcycles. They may travel to arts festivals, staying in 3-star hotels and subsisting on adequate per diems, but they also perform for tourists at home, that earns them US\$6 per show. Booming retail and trade in Phnom Penh has resulted in worsening traffic congestion all over the city, and traffic laws are constantly being flouted (Soma 2012, [www.phnompenhpost.com](http://www.phnompenhpost.com)). The majority of vehicles on the road are motorcycles, and their riders speed haphazardly through their journey. Two of Amrita's dancers have been seriously injured in motorcycle accidents: one of is still undergoing reparative treatment and surgery on his crushed cheekbones two years after the accident.

Some Amrita dancers have also remarked on the rise of a commercial classical industry, where young dancers rush through their training without regard for the finer points of their art forms to gain employment in the increasing number of new hotels opening in the two main cities of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. These hotels are eager to hire classical dancers for cultural performances in restaurants and lobbies for tourists who want a taste of the exotic.

Concerns about declining standards of training and education at classical arts institutions are also becoming prevalent. Amrita dancer Chey Chankethya (Kethya) has written of challenging times ahead for fine arts institutions such as the Phnom Penh-based Royal University of Fine Arts and the School of Fine Arts. Aside from decreasing student enrolment due to more employment options with the economic boom, Kethya candidly reports that teaching standards have dropped for a range of reasons, from lack of equipment to "poor curriculum standards", to the distant location of a new school. One of the main issue concerns the teaching staff:

Most teachers prefer to teach students through their own experiences rather than through written texts, resulting in disagreements amongst them. ... The lack of group solidarity is also a school problem. In the dance department there are professors who are highly trained in technique, but they are not always able to work



together to accomplish goals, negotiate solutions and discuss problems. Low salaries for the teachers and their low status in society means that they must try to find other work to maintain their income to support themselves, affecting their teaching, the school and the students and impeding the school's progress...

(2010, 37)

Whether in the home country or abroad, the life of a Cambodian dancer or artist would have been no less certain or stable in many aspects. Rather than focus on what Ridout and Schneider call "bad precarity", there are prospects of "good precarity" (2012, 8), which could present opportunities and possibilities. "Life in capitalism, *as usual*" need not be about uncertainty, insecurity and instability. Aside from focusing on the individual and aspects of individuality in listing his criteria on 'Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World', Ulrich Beck also highlights the role of the institution in modern living and livelihood (2001, 166-167). He states that "your own life is completely dependent on institutions" that replace "binding traditions". Rather than what he calls the suffocating controls of past corporate and agricultural societies, the modern individual is more affiliated with networks of guidelines and regulations. As Beck puts it, these "modern guidelines actually compel the self-organisation and self-thematisation of people's biographies" (2001, 166). The Amrita dancers are highly motivated and committed in their efforts to expand their dance practices and seek to eke out possible ways of living for this purpose. They do more than just perform and perhaps teach their classical art forms. Their "self-organisation" and "self-thematisation" have already differentiated them from many other classical performers in the country who eke out a living being permanent teachers in government institutions, or officials in the ministry of culture, or even to solely perform in the proliferation of tourists shows for income stability. In other words, dancers such as Belle, Kethya and Phon possess a wide range in the possibilities of the "self-thematisation" partly due to the special flexibility and responsiveness of Amrita as an organisation.

In the first place, flexible hours of employment for some of the Amrita dancers leads to extra income, and also the means of expanding and developing their dance practices with projects abroad that may mean up to two months away

from home. Being a full-time classical teacher in the university would not have allowed for these artistic possibilities of being away from a permanent position. As I have highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, skilled dancers such as Phon, Kethya and Belle participate in many international projects. With the booming business back in Phnom Penh, these dancers also enjoy more commercial opportunities as they hone their dedicated dance practices. Belle especially has diversified her dance talents to include choreographing more commercial entertainments for private company launches and events as an extra source of income. Her dance colleagues benefit from this too as her dancers for such commercial events.

Alternative kinds of artistic as well as commercial opportunities arise locally and abroad while the dancers continue to develop their dance. As a community the Amrita dancers work towards the common goal of developing dance in their country through their classical and traditional expertise. As individuals, the dancers are free to choose projects that enrich their artistic development even though some of the foreign arts networks may seem tenuous and influenced by numerous variables as explained earlier: while some projects fail, others will develop to fruition. For those participating in international projects that do take off, there is the security of income that lasts for a few months, while the long-term benefits of potential performance tours and even more artistic work in the future become additional incentives. In a country where public and private institutional funding is scarce for avant-garde or experimental arts, and where even endangered classical arts do not receive adequate financial resources, the issue of making a living through one's art becomes ever more crucial. There are however also smaller and more gradual positive effects that come from working with external choreographers or in foreign environments.

The Amrita dancers' experimentations with their classical forms is said to have begun only in 2005,<sup>43</sup> but they have experienced and performed experimental

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<sup>43</sup> According to Amrita's website, the organisation's first foray into experimentation was with their *Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants* in 2005. ('Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants' 2013, <http://amritaperformingarts.org>).

dances at a fast rate. Since then, individual dancers have utilised their new forms of dance knowledge and skills in other ways. For instance, the *Source/Primate* dancers benefitted from the breathing techniques taught to Phon when he performed for Renz in *Crack*. I observed how monkey master Phon led the same *Crack* breathing exercises for the *Source/Primate* dancers during warm-up exercises before the performance in Singapore. More recently Phon has also started conducting contemporary dance workshops with younger Cambodian dancers in the city. Kethya, who was in *Khmeropedies II* and *Crack*, is presently arming herself with a Master of Fine Arts degree in dance and choreography from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) after receiving a Fulbright grant in 2011. She will join her fellow Amrita dancers upon her return from her studies in 2014 to be the organisation's first artistic director.

From a wider perspective, the process of continual creativity is perpetuated as Amrita Performing Arts group held its first ever 'Contemporary Dance Platform' in November 2013. In their official web blog Amrita Performing Arts communicated the objectives of the platform:

Following on the momentum of years of artistic collaborations with international choreographers and directors, Cambodian choreographers are tapping into their new found [sic] skills as well as their classical training in the creation of new works, as they continue to develop their own Cambodian contemporary dance vocabulary. Through this platform, works created by Cambodian choreographers will be created, developed and showcased as well as highlights from our ongoing international collaborations.

(‘A Contemporary Dance Platform’ 2013)

Two out of the three choreographies featured were created by Cambodian dancers. One of them, Belle, has performed and toured extensively in performances of *Khmeropedies I & II* and *Crack*, along with a variety of dance residencies in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, monkey master Phon is also expanding his experience with roles as rehearsal director and assistant to foreign choreographers in projects such as the touring *Source/Primate* and *Crack*. Hence the cumulative effects of different and new choreographic styles and body techniques that the

dancers have embodied are beginning to yield even newer and more creative results in the form of new choreographers.

As much as the Amrita dancers may be perceived to be acquiring new artistic knowledge that is not only foreign to them, but requires considerable effort and sometimes physical risks, the dancers ultimately take ownership of these new technologies. They do this by locating and adapting them to the wider sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts of their home base. Thus far I have analysed how disrupting global and dance rhythms lead to new body aesthetics. These emergent body aesthetics are also implicated in changing body cultures through history. These 'micro' factors impact on the choreographic modernities of the dancers, moving from internal dance aesthetics of rhythm to physicalisations of bodily movements and cultures and then broadening to home-based socio-political and cultural contexts. While capitalism is mentioned in this chapter, the broader implications of global flows of capital, economy and knowledge now have to be introduced because Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are highly mobile artists. The next chapter examines the dancers' particular on-going artistic relationship outside their home countries, specifically in a foreign arts hub with many networks that yield incremental benefits in their creative work.

## CHAPTER 6

### SINGAPORE:

#### Modernity Through Capital Mobilisation

##### Introduction

The making of contemporary Singapore as a regional cultural hub has its beginnings in the 1980s. Once the city-state achieved its status as a secure economic and financial hub at that time, the ruling party People's Action Party began to perceive Singapore's capital-based modernity as somewhat lacking. Arts and culture began to take on bigger significance as a 'civilising' means to cultivate a society made up of, as then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong put it in 1986, "refined and gracious people, a thoughtful people, a society of sparkling ideas, where art, literature and music flourish" (quoted in Nathan 1999, 298). The government then paid serious attention to the development of arts and culture with cultural policies put into place. Moreover, the economic recession that hit Singapore in 1985 triggered an even more pragmatic interest in arts and culture as potential economic growth industries with tourist appeal (Chong 2011, 34-37). Arts and culture in Singapore in the 1980s took on an almost feverish growth, with new cultural policies that encouraged many forms of supporting infrastructure.

Following this, the Singapore government's expansion of cultural policies from the 1990s to the early 2000s saw a push for a Global City for the Arts that would lead to the government's vision of Singapore as a "Renaissance City". Since 2000, Singapore's cultural ministry (the then Ministry of Information and the Arts, MITA) has spearheaded the Renaissance City Plan (RCP) to position Singapore as "a cultural centre in the globalised world" and also to "provide cultural ballast in our nation-building efforts" (*Renaissance* 2000, 4).<sup>44</sup>The economy was always a major

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<sup>44</sup> To be precise, the call to go global was undertaken in 1992 when Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB) with MITA presented a report entitled *Singapore: Global City for the Arts* (1992). There was then a second report jointly presented by the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board and MITA that supported the Global City for the Arts proposal. According to Chong both reports "expounded the economic opportunities in the local arts industry" (2011, 26) that again, fit the government's rational and pragmatic mode of governance.

consideration, and the report quickly rationalises that “[a]part from the direct economic benefits that accrue to arts and cultural activities, creative and artistic endeavours will also play a decisive role in the future economy” (*Renaissance* 2000, 5). In the *Renaissance City Plan Report I*, the vision for a “Renaissance Singapore” was to “build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat” (2000, 5). The report goes as far as to imagine the city-state as a “Cultural Capital of Asia” (*Renaissance* 2000, 27). Singapore cultural studies scholar C. J. Wan-ling Wee argues that this Asian model of modernity has its roots in what he calls the “flexible statist management of culture,” where the government has carefully orchestrated and marshaled the nation’s arts and cultural development toward nation building (2007, 102-103). Culture, along with capital, have become some of the prime movers in the city-state’s bid for 21<sup>st</sup>-century modernity. Wee further contends that the government “without understatement, can be described as the Southeast Asian socio-cultural engineer *par excellence*. Since 1959, it has been involved in the radical attempt to create a society erected upon industrial modernity” (2007, 125).

I will give a few examples of the ‘ground level’ activities in the 1990s and 2000s to contextualise the emergent ‘New Asia’ in Singapore at that time. The first example is Ong Keng Sen’s biennial Flying Circus Projects, which focus on intercultural performance and have seen gatherings of Asian theatremakers, dancers, visual artists and musicians in Singapore since 1996. Second, in larger state arts and performance platforms, the 35-year-old state-run Singapore Arts Festival has also grown to include more Asian acts, while the relatively young Singapore Biennale launched by the National Arts Council (NAC) in 2006, is ambitiously pitched as a serious art event in the region emphasising the visual art *of* the region.

Third, in addition to a proliferation of cultural infrastructure projects such as museums (Singapore Art Museum opened in 1996, Asian Civilisations Museums in 2003, the National Museum of Singapore was relaunched in 2006, the Centre for Contemporary Art opened in 2013, and the National Art Gallery will open in 2015) and rejuvenated performing arts spaces, the government’s most impressive performance infrastructural investment to date is the Esplanade – Theatres by the

Bay. Officially opened in 2002 the S\$600 million (US\$345 million) 'world class' arts complex boasts a Concert Hall, a proscenium Theatre with close to 2,000 seats, and a smaller black box Theatre Studio that seats 200 people, visual arts exhibition space, recital and rehearsal studios, and a performing arts library, all housed along with a range of food and beverage and retail outlets. Since its opening, Esplanade has put on an year-round calendar of dance, theatre, visual art and music programmes, with up to 15 different themed festivals and 19 smaller thematic series (Esplanade 2013, 104-106).

The 'Asian factor' also underscored the grand opening festival of Esplanade, a 23-day celebration that saw a gathering of 1,300 international performers from 22 countries, presenting dance, theatre, music and visual arts. The more lavish performances delivered a regional cultural flavour to the festival, with productions such as the National Ballet of China's *Raise the Red Lantern*, and more homegrown offerings such as the Singapore Dance Theatre's *Reminiscing the Moon* (choreographed by Boi Sakti), and Singapore Repertory Theatre's musical *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, written by Dick Lee with popular local singer Kit Chan playing the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi. There was also a special programme called the Asian Contemporary Theatre festival, which presented performances by Indonesia's Sardono Dance Theatre, India's Kalakshetra Manipur, Japan's Gekidan Kaitaisha and Taiwan's Shakespeare's Wild Sisters.

In an effort to add academic legitimacy to Esplanade's opening festivals, the Asian Contemporary Festival also featured a conference entitled "Coping with the Contemporary: Selves, Identity and Community" where conference participants such as Tadashi Uchino and Rustom Bharucha addressed Asian identity politics. 'Asia fever' in Singapore was by then at its peak, with local and international scholars from the humanities to political sciences debating on the extent to which Singapore *was* Asia. Just a few years earlier, in 1997, Ong Keng Sen had presented his intercultural *Lear* as a re-imagining of Asia in performance, and this continued with *Desdemona* in 2000. These two performances were widely discussed, and their construction – and

reconstruction – of contemporary Asia through Singapore’s eyes hotly contested, along with what it meant for Singapore to represent Asia.<sup>45</sup>

Hence, Asian artists from diverse disciplines have had especially productive ties with Singapore for the past four decades. These artists do not merely showcase their works in arts festivals, biennales or other opportunities for presentation. Many artists, theatremakers and dancers from the region and beyond have gained artistically as well as economically from ‘incubation’, work-in-progress and artist-residence projects offered by various Singaporean arts bodies, institutions and events. Pichet Klunchun’s company and the Amrita dancers are amongst those who enjoy this relationship with Singapore. As briefly mentioned in previous chapters, the two groups of dancers frequently feature in the city-state’s arts festivals and performance-venue programming. Klunchun had earlier been inducted into the Singapore arts network when he participated in Ong Keng Sen’s third Flying Circus project in 2000 and was then cast in Ong’s site-specific *Search: Hamlet* (2002) staged in Copenhagen, Denmark. He also performed in Ong’s *Global Soul* (2003), which premiered in Singapore and then travelled to Switzerland, Netherlands, Hungary, the UK, and Austria. From 2006, Klunchun has presented his own performances in Singapore, beginning with *I Am Demon* (2005). That same year, Amrita Performing Arts made their debut with *Revitalizing Monkeys and Giants* (2005), a collaboration with Klunchun.

Since then, both Klunchun and the Amrita dancers have frequently returned to Singapore to present performances, participate in international arts network congresses, and conduct teaching stints at local performing arts academies. They are far from alone in their connections with Singapore. Malaysian choreographers

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<sup>45</sup> There is a wealth of scholarly articles on the subject of Ong’s *Lear* and *Desdemona* in the ‘Singapore/Asia’ discourse in relation to issues of performance and identity politics, most notably Rustom Bharucha’s “Consuming in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of *Lear*” (2001), CJWL Wee’s “Staging the Asian modern; cultural fragments, the Singapore eunuch, and the Asian *Lear*” (2004), Bharucha’s “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization” (2004), and William Peterson’s “Consuming the Asian Other in Singapore: Interculturalism in TheatreWorks’ *Desdemona*” (2003). There is also a first person response from Ong on his experiences of working on *Desdemona* in “Encounter” (2001).



Azanin Ahmad and Marion D’Cruz also developed similar relationships through their performances and networking activities with various Singaporean arts organisations. Azanin staged her *Seri Rama-Siti Dewi* at the 1990 Singapore Arts Festival, while D’Cruz has a more substantial and consistent link, having performed regularly in Singapore since the early 1990s. She has presented her own work in Singapore, choreographed for several Singapore theatre projects, and danced for Ong Keng Sen in his Berlin and Copenhagen tours of *Lear* in 1999. More recently she choreographed a new version of her successful *Urn Piece* (1988) at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2012.

Two observations can be gleaned from these examples. One, the growth of Singapore’s arts and culture since the 1980s is intimately linked to its state cultural policies, and two, since the government’s push to burnish the city-state’s position as a cultural hub, regional artists have enjoyed an ever-increasing presence there. This chapter examines the implications of Singapore’s cultural policies for some of the on ground activities of Singaporean commissioning institutions and resident artist initiatives. It illustrates how Klunchun’s company and the Amrita dancers have benefitted from such circumstances. I argue that Singapore’s cultural policies have not only helped realise the city-state’s goal of becoming a cultural hub in the region, but that in the process, it has become as a ‘cultural broker’ of sorts, with arts officials and programmers actively cultivating international arts and cultural networks. In doing so, I contend that complex and multi-layered relationships are formed between foreign dancers and Singapore in light of the city-state’s goal of attaining the status of regional cultural hub. Regional artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers then not only develop their artistic careers with infrastructural, technical and financial support from Singapore, but they go on to succeed in the larger international arena.

### **Accumulation of Capital: The Singapore Arts Festival**

The Singapore Arts Festival boasts of a history of mixing local and international arts programming since its inception in 1977. From a “modest home-grown event” (Peterson 2009, 114), the festival’s initial objective back in the 1980s

was to “encourage, improve and create awareness of the arts of the nation” as mentioned in the 1980 festival guide (quoted in Phang 2007, 57). By the mid 1990s, the festival had positioned itself in the international arts circuit and its commissioning efforts started in the 2000s, partly motivated by the Renaissance City Plan. Annex 1 of the recent *Arts Fest Review Committee Report* from the National Arts Council (NAC), states:

Over the years, starting with the Renaissance City Plan in 2000, the desire to develop a more sophisticated audience and to position Singapore as a global city led to a more ambitious and annual Arts Fest that brought in the best of international acts. The Arts Fest also started to embark on more local commissions and co-commissions with overseas partners.

(2012, 2)

Another contributing factor was attributed to director Goh Ching Lee, who helmed the festival between 2000 and 2009. She began to shape the festival into an “edgier” international event, while retaining its commitment to Asian performances (Peterson 2009, 118). As the longest serving artistic director to date – Low Kee Hong served as General Manager from 2010-12<sup>46</sup> – Goh developed local artist commissions, and also introduced international commissions and artistic collaborations. For instance, in her first year as artistic director, Goh commissioned Robert Wilson’s *Hot Water* and Ong Keng Sen’s intercultural *Desdemona*. Attendance at arts events trebled in the ten years between 1996 and 2005 (National Arts Council Singapore, 2006). This then paved the way for more international commissions and collaborations in the festival, in a bid to realise the city-state’s vision as a Global City of the Arts. The 2007 Singapore Arts Festival guide claimed that “commissions, co-commissions or co-productions with international festivals have become a hallmark” of the festival (Phang 2007, 57). In 2010, various forms of commissions, co-commissions and co-productions resulted in a total of 18 new local and foreign productions.

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<sup>46</sup> The Singapore Arts Festival took a hiatus in 2013 – which would have been its 36<sup>th</sup> edition – to be reconfigured under new artistic director Ong Keng Sen in 2014. The ‘new’ festival in 2014 – renamed Singapore International Festival of Arts – will also be organised and managed under a new company called Arts Festival Limited. For more information on the Singapore International Festival of Arts in 2014 go to <https://www.gov.sg/media-centre/news-releases/news-detail?id=e2dff3c4-8cc9-4f91-97fe-f8a6e396a068>.

In 'The Forms of Capital' (1986) Bourdieu examines the concept of capital acquisition in society and suggests three categories: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital relates directly to money and property, while social capital refers to actual and potential networks, links and relationships – what Bourdieu terms “membership in a group” that comes with “the backing of collectively-owned capital” (1986, 249). For Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three types or forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised (1986, 243). The first refers to artistic talent or expertise that is embodied in a person, while objectified cultural capital consists of artistic and cultural products such as books, artworks and even performances. Bourdieu’s third type of cultural capital, the institutionalised form, consists of the institutional practices by which culture is perpetuated in a society. While one of the intentions of Singapore government is to gain “direct economic benefits that accrue to arts and cultural activities” (*Renaissance* 2000, 5), there are other kinds of benefits that are reaped.

Bourdieu writes that “different types of capital can be derived from economic capital ... at the cost of more or less great effort of transformation” (1986, 251). Read against Singapore’s emergent cultural policies since the 1990s and its goal of becoming a Global City of the Arts, the government’s heavy financial<sup>47</sup> and infrastructural investment in the form of arts events like the Singapore Arts Festival and centres such as the Esplanade would be an example of how an investment of economic capital is made in hopes of generating cultural capital in its different forms. The “great effort of transformation” as elaborated by Bourdieu is evident in Singapore’s fast changing arts and cultural landscape, which went from being called a “cultural desert”<sup>48</sup> in the 1980s and first half of 1990s, to the proliferation of public events and activities, arts venues, museums and galleries in the 2000s.

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<sup>47</sup> According to the latest Singapore Cultural Statistics Report by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (2012), government funding for arts and culture has increased steadily from S\$230.2 (US\$181.8) million in 2005 to S\$437.2 (US\$345.3) million in 2011.

<sup>48</sup> As a result of a pragmatic and capitalist approach to its nation building in the 1970s and 1980s, Wee writes that there was an “elevation of petit-bourgeois values” of the highly consumerist Singapore society, and that the city-state was known abroad as a “cultural desert” from the 1980s to the early 1990s, where it was “a land of shopping centres” (2007, 12).

The transactions and transformations between economic and cultural capital are further complicated by two elements. First, Bourdieu also writes that while cultural capital can be acquired through economic capital, the manifestation of cultural capital accumulation is better recognised as a fourth kind of capital – symbolic capital (1986, 256). All three forms of economic, cultural and social capital can develop into symbolic capital through the different ways they are represented or legitimised by society. In Singapore’s case, we may say that the city-state various capital investments have been made with the aim of acquiring symbolic capital as a regional cultural hub, with the title “Global City of the Arts”.

Second, there is a cumulative effect, where an increase in both economic and cultural capital can lead to even further accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 246). This is exemplified by the growth of the Singapore Arts Festival when Goh Ching Lee was director. During Goh’s tenure, the festival amassed an impressive list of international collaborations such as Singapore’s Tang Quartet with UK’s Theatre Cryptic (*Optical Identity*, 2007), but there were also collaborative co-productions with other festivals such as Ong Keng Sen’s *Sandakan Threnody*, 2004, co-produced with the Melbourne and Brisbane Festivals, and Ho Tzu Nyen’s *The Lear Project* (2008), co-produced with Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels. As the festival grew and developed, the artistic, technical, administrative and financial collaboration, co-production, and co-commission formulations became varied and creative. This then added to the programming breadth of the festival that grew in variety, quality and critical distinction through the years. It also fostered international artistic ties. During Goh’s time, the 2004 festival saw a “record-breaking audience attendance figure” of 916,700 (Phang 2007, 56). Through time, the Singapore Arts Festival would gain a respectable reputation in its 35-year history. The cumulative and transformative effects of economic capital to cultural capital, and eventually symbolic capital, in the Singapore Arts Festival’s situation would lead to a certain position of power as a festival with an authoritative direction in artistic experimentation in the field of arts and culture internationally.

Subsequently, the accumulation of economic, cultural and symbolic capital would then impact a person, organisation or community's social capital, in the ways relationships and networks are developed. Bourdieu writes that "[t]he volume of social capital by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right" (1986, 249). As the Singapore Arts Festival has gained a critical reputation through its programming and commissioning activities by producing quality productions, the opportunities to develop artistic relationships and networks with international artists and other festivals have increased.

The commissioning processes of Amrita's *Crack* at the 2011 Singapore Arts Festival are indicative of the festival's social capital in establishing and exploiting its funding networks and arts circuits in the region. Having brought choreographer Arco Renz and Amrita Performing Arts together, the festival then sought funding cooperation and assistance from Goethe Institut in Jakarta, Indonesia, which is the regional headquarters for Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand. By the time *Crack* premiered in Singapore, plans were underway to present the performance at Jakarta's Indonesian Dance Festival and Berlin's Tanz Im August Festival in 2012. German-born choreographer Renz and his Belgium-based dance company kobalt works also assisted in further networking with the Flemish Authorities' International Projects to secure *Crack's* performance tours in Belgium. Renz as an individual choreographer benefitted as well as from the close cooperation between the Singapore Arts Festival and Goethe Institut in this region, as new opportunities opened up: Renz subsequently choreographed Indonesian artists Eko Supriyanto and Melanie Lane in the dance performance *Solid States* in 2012.

### **Southeast Asian Cultural Capital**

While the third *Renaissance City Plan Report* (2008) reiterated the ambition of positioning the city-state as a "Distinctive Global City of the Arts" (2008, 6) and "the choice destination to create and premiere original content focusing on Singapore and Asia", a specific focus was placed on Southeast Asia:

With its world-class cultural performing venues and museums, Singapore will be positioned as the choice destination for arts professionals, whether local or foreign, to create or premiere an original work rooted in Singapore's own multi-cultural arts and heritage, as well as the diverse ethnic traditions of Asia, in particular, Southeast Asia.

(2008, 19)

In line with this renewed Southeast Asian focus, the report envisaged that the (then) Ministry of Information Culture and the Arts along with the NAC would "encourage more arts professionals in ASEAN and wider Asia to create and premiere works here in Singapore, making full use of our cultural infrastructure to develop ourselves as a hub of creative activity in Asia" (2008, 19). While the earlier versions of the RCP in 2000 and 2005 envisioned Singapore as a cultural hub offering diverse Asian cultural and artistic products, artifacts, and performances through its museums, art galleries and theatres, the latest plan went one step further to encourage the production of Southeast Asian and Asian artistic products *within* Singapore.

Since its opening, Esplanade has taken on the role of artistic commissioner for new performances by regional artists in their various annual festivals and other thematic programming. Under the rather unfortunately pompous sounding subhead of "Giving Asian Artists a Voice", Esplanade's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative book notes the centre's contribution in "helping to bring the Asian voice and Asian stories to the world stage". It gives only two names – one from Southeast Asia and another from East Asia – as examples: "This support for new Asian productions extends to working with eminent directors from the region such as Taiwan's playwright Stan Lai and Thailand's dancer-choreographer Pichet Klunchun" (*Esplanade* 2013, 116). This brief example belies the broad spectrum of infrastructural and financial support the arts centre has afforded. Take for example, Esplanade's annual Da:ns Festival, which was launched in 2006. Since its modest debut, the programming mix has taken into consideration local as well as international dance performances. New commissions were also offered from the outset, including various levels and options of co-commissioning and co-producing collaborations for dance productions. While Singaporean dancers became regular commission recipients, such as Tammy Wong (*About Last Night*, 2006), Albert Tiong (*Checkmate*, 2008), Daniel Kok (*Hokkaido*,

2010), and Ming Poon (*The Infinitesimal Distance Between Two Bodies*, 2013), the festival began to search for dancers and dancemakers in the region. It started with Indonesia's Boi Sakti, who in 2009 worked with dancers from Singaporean T.H.E. Dance Company. The festival also added an artist-in-residency component to its commissions in 2008.

In 2011, the Da:ns Festival commissioned Pichet Klunchun's dance company to create *Black and White*. This included a five-week artists-in-residence programme in Singapore. Klunchun became the first regional choreographer to be commissioned by the festival in this way. After a month of rehearsals in their Bangkok studio, Klunchun and his dancers continued their rehearsals either in Esplanade's rehearsal studio, or at dance studios in Singapore's School of The Arts (SOTA). In addition to this, the commission budget allowed for a dance dramaturg who could assist and collaborate with Klunchun in his creative process. This resulted in my participation as dramaturg in the commission. Since Klunchun's *Black and White*, Da:ns Festival programmers have ensured that subsequent commissions and artist-in-residence projects have included the option of a dramaturg. Poon's dance commissions in 2013 also saw the presence of a dramaturg in their creative processes.<sup>49</sup>

The commission also allocates two preview performances about three weeks before the performance premiere. This is so that the choreographer and dancers can benefit from constructive critical feedback. Established and experienced dance and theatre practitioners, including performance academics from the Singapore arts community are invited to the preview, where they then participate in a discussion session with the choreographer and dancers. The preview is set up like the actual performance in the theatre, with a technical rehearsal followed by a dress rehearsal.

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<sup>49</sup> My first 'official' dance dramaturgical experience/role began with Da:ns Festival in 2009 with a lecture demonstration between Malaysian Bharata Natyam dancer January Low and classical Cambodian dancer Hun Penh entitled *Seen Silent*. While developing various support dance commissions, co-commissions and co-productions among dancemakers, Esplanade's Da:ns Festival has inevitably promoted the role of the dance dramaturg in the creation process. I have had the opportunity to work as dramaturg on Klunchun's and Poon's choreographic commissions, which in turn assisted in my dance dramaturgical development. The Singapore Arts Festival in 2010 under the helm of general manager Low Kee Hong also put in place a committee of dramaturgs from different genres to assist in local as well as foreign dance, theatre or music commissions.

The entire Esplanade technical theatre personnel of stage management, sound and light crew work toward the preview as if it was opening night. The preview and resulting discussions for Klunchun's *Black and White* contributed to the final rehearsal stages. Klunchun took the opinions of the preview guests into consideration and refined some elements of the performance accordingly. Briefly, Klunchun changed his female dancer's costume that was originally a white gown that resembled a Western wedding gown. In a particular scene, Klunchun performed a duet with the female dancer that was supposed to be a fight scene. The preview audiences thought the scene was confusing, as they had misinterpreted the duet for a love scene symbolised by the female dancer's perceived wedding gown. In a later scene Klunchun appeared on stage with the same white gown twirled round a metal staff. Klunchun then proceeded to thrash and hit the gown violently to the floor. The preview audiences brought up the point of gender violence embedded in the scene. After careful consideration, Klunchun decided to replace the female dancer's white gown with a simple body suit.

The financial, technical and infrastructural support for commissions and arts-in-residence projects such as Klunchun's *Black and White* is a sizeable investment into the acquisition of cultural capital. However, the symbolic as well as social capital acquired through such an exercise only prove to accumulate more symbolic and social capital for Esplanade – just like the Singapore Arts Festival – with an emphasis on Southeast Asian cultural capital. Even in the example of Klunchun's *Black and White* preview, the festival capitalised on Esplanade's local symbolic and social capital to invite arts practitioners who would, by extension, become part of the festival's cultural capital acquisition. On the other hand, the Da:ns Festival also relies on the cultural capital of local practitioners in terms of their embodied knowledge and expertise to provide critically significant feedback for a project such as Klunchun's, when they contributed constructive critique on the female dancer's costume and its consequent semiotics and dramaturgy.

Other than commissions, the Da:ns Festival also regularly showcases regional performances such as Indonesian Jecko Siompo's *We Came From the East* in 2011,



Japanese company Sankai Juku's *Tobari* in 2012 and Amrita's *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* in 2013. More than that, Esplanade's other thematic programming has featured regional acts such as Eri Mefry's company, Nan Jombang, in their performance of *Tarian Malam* in 2012, a co-commission with the Brisbane Powerhouse, Australia. Amrita Performing Arts organisation has also benefitted from Esplanade's wide-ranging performance programming, and to date has presented four works in its Theatre Studio venue: dance performance *Transmission of The Invisible* (2009) choreographed by Canada-based Peter Chin, theatre performance *Breaking the Silence* (2010) directed by Annemarie Prins of the Netherlands, and *Khmeropedies I & II* (2010) choreographed by Emmanuèle Phuon. While cultural capital acquisition seems to be the prime activity here, the positive effects of acquiring social as well as symbolic capital simultaneously are enjoyed by Esplanade on the whole.

### **Mutual Benefits**

Esplanade's claims of "helping to bring the Asian voice and Asian stories to the world stage" (*Esplanade* 2013, 116) may sound overly ambitious in its goal to be an Asian 'world-class' arts centre. Yet there is no denying the variety of support schemes that have gone into showcasing and assisting emergent dancers and choreographers, especially in the region.<sup>50</sup> Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are prime illustrations of how dance artists benefit from Singapore's cultural policy of going global through some of the commissioning activities of Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival. As an artistic and creative enabler, Esplanade does indeed possess the infrastructural advantages of quality performance venues with efficient technical know-how and support to nurture regional arts and cultural practices. State funding also contributes to the hefty financial demands of running a large arts complex – Esplanade received a total of S\$46 million (US\$38 million) in government funding just for 2012 (Tan 2013, A3).

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<sup>50</sup> I have concentrated thus far on the dance activities in both the Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival to give focus on arguments for this thesis. Esplanade's and the arts festival's commission and artist-in-residency projects are also available to other performance genres of drama, theatre, music and visual arts, if not more attention has been focused on developing theatre arts.

Historically speaking, “modern” Singapore has proven itself to be a successful regional hub, even if it did begin with trade and commerce. Known as an *entrepôt*, Singapore was a bustling tax-free trading post from the beginning of the British colonial period, in 1819. In the 1970s and 1980s Singapore expanded its *entrepôt* activities to include the processing of raw materials into half-finished goods in electronics, oil, and chemicals for the region. Since the 1990s, the city-state has been better known for its financial and commercial services, thus providing the basis for Singapore to go into building a knowledge economy. Even more pertinent to its growing economy at present is Singapore’s constant organisation and balancing of human resource demand and supply in the midst of developing its knowledge economy, employing manual as well as skilled labour from throughout the region. A remark made in 2007 by the recently-appointed Singapore Arts Festival Chief Executive Officer Lee Chor Lin (who was at the time director of Singapore’s National Museum) echoes some of Singapore’s global and transnational artistic and cultural activities in 2013:

We’re returning to the idea of Singapore as an entrepot [*sic*], a crossroads of trade in the region. As that trade expands, more people of different nationalities come to Singapore, and it has created not just an economic entrepot, but a cultural entrepot.

(quoted by Shankari 2007, 52)

While Singapore scholars debate the fraught relationships between the government’s discourses of modernity and globalisation, the identity politics of its citizens, and the emergence of local arts and culture,<sup>51</sup> Singapore as a “cultural *entrepôt*” can be viewed as beneficial to foreign artists coming through the city-state in search of developmental support. ‘Raw materials’ of artistry, talent, knowledge

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<sup>51</sup> C. J. W.-L. Wee’s *The Asian Modern* (2007) tackles in great detail the cultural-political history of Singapore’s post-independence journey into its current modern Global City of the Arts ambition that is fraught with disjunctive ‘on-ground’ sociocultural politics due to the city-state’s multicultural population. He argues that culture is wielded just like capital by the Singapore government, which in turn becomes the driving force behind the city-state’s modernity of “managed culture” (103). He further contends that this situation has created cultural and artistic forms within Singapore that reveals tensions between local identity politics and cosmopolitan/global aesthetics. Terence Chong’s *The Theatre and the State in Singapore* (2011) examines from a sociopolitical perspective how Singapore contemporary theatre transgresses the government’s cultural politics thus arguing how the development of local theatre has been shaped by the states’ very cultural politics.

and skills land in Singapore, which are then nurtured and presented in top notch infrastructures of theatres, concert halls and museums, and the 'finished goods' of performances or art objects are rerouted onto regional and international networks and circuits. However, this is too simplistic a view to take when considering that partially-finished/completed goods produced in an *entrepôt* mostly leave the manufacturing site without ever returning. Even if they were to return, they would in all probability return as finished goods for the end user, the consumers. It is a different matter when artists such as Klunchun and the Amria dancers return repeatedly to Singapore because there is value besides creating or performing different products.

Klunchun and the Amrita dancers also reap rewards by tapping into Singapore's diverse range of networks of association and influence. These dancers then seize the opportunities that Singapore has to offer as a 'launch point'; first, for their artistic work and development to travel globally, and second, for additional income and funding opportunities. Financial support and sponsorship opportunities in their home countries are slim and 'mavericks' such as Klunchun and Amrita, whose efforts into experimental works with their classical art forms are still frowned upon by state institutions and authorities. The Singapore commission of *Black and White*, however, provided some financial security to Klunchun's dance company, which has five full-time dancers. In his home country, the situation is slowly changing for Klunchun. After successful international stagings of *Nijinsky Siam* and *Black and White*, and almost a year after their Singapore premieres, the performances have finally begun to be received with positive responses from critics and general audiences alike.

Klunchun admits, however, that local funding for bigger productions is still lacking in Bangkok, and that's when sourcing and cultivating international funding opportunities are important. In the case of Amrita, their experimental efforts with classical performance forms are still funded by international bodies. These are mainly from the US – such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Asian Cultural Council, and the US Embassy in Phnom Penh – due to their non-profit organisation status there.

In short, both parties profit mutually from commissioning activities. While Klunchun and the Amrita dancers continue with their artistic development, Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival fulfill their missions of securing global social and symbolic capital in terms of reputation and position of authority with specific Southeast Asian or Asian commissions and co-productions.

As much as institutions and events such as Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival benefit from the artistic commissions, collaborations and networks by returning visiting artists, there are incremental advantages to building a relationship and network with Singapore for the artists. On one hand, new performances are usually created and performed each time Klunchun and the Amrita dancers work in Singapore, and on the other, they strengthen their relationship networks in Singapore that afford more artistic opportunities in other festivals and countries, and, with other international artists. Bourdieu clarifies:

The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed.

(1986, 251)

The more Klunchun and the Amrita dancers create works in Singapore, the more they develop their artistic reputation that in turn strengthens their own networks in their “continuous series of exchanges” that enable them to create and perform in other places. More than that, the “recognition” that Bourdieu mentions above extends not just to the artists’ reputation but also what the artist represents in her work. For instance, as discussed at length in Chapter 3, the recognition of an artist’s signature and signature practices and the individual qualities are just as important in establishing work relationships and artistic connections. Klunchun’s single-minded mission in developing classical dance with his own particular aesthetics and expertise in Khon endow him with ideal cultural capital that the Da:ns Festival seeks. Furthermore, there is Klunchun’s personality and charisma in the way he presents his art and ideas. All these qualities actually contribute in building a certain reputation that is unique and easily ‘recognised’ in Klunchun.

As demonstrated above, commissioners Esplanade and the Singapore Arts festival as well as their commissionees such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers profit mutually. While Klunchun and the Amrita dancers continue with their artistic development, Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival fulfill their missions of securing hub qualities with specific Southeast Asian or Asian commissions and co-productions for their respective brands.

### **Singaporean Movements**

In this section I discuss some recent local contemporary dance developments that are implicated in the nation's pragmatic approach to cultivating a modern cultural hub through economic capital. One question that arises is, if institutions such as Esplanade and events like the Singapore Arts Festival are commissioning regional contemporary dancers who innovate with their local heritage or indigenous classical forms, what are some of the distinctive traits Singapore's contemporary dance works? Although traditional dance forms such as the Indian Bharata Natyam and Odissi, and the Malay Joget are practised in Singapore, most cultural production in dance is modern and contemporary. The modern and contemporary aspects in Singapore dance, centre largely on Western body techniques such as the Graham, Viewpoints and release techniques, and dance styles such as jazz, contact improvisation and modern ballet.

While the Singapore Dance Theatre (established 1988) presents repertory ballet works, both classical as well as contemporary, several dance companies concentrate their efforts on contemporary choreography and aesthetics that feature a mixture of dance styles and techniques. One of the oldest is Frontier Danceland (founded in 1991), which was successful in the 1990s in presenting innovative dance performances featuring well-trained dancers who had returned from training both in the West and in Asia, including with Lin Hwai Min's Cloud Gate Theatre in Taiwan. Then there is Arts Fission (established 1994), where choreographer Angela Liong has sought to create her own brand of dance theatre that marries the classical conventions of Asian dances with western techniques. The most recent dance company to emerge is Albert Tiong's Re:Dance Theatre. Launched in 1992, Tiong's

choreographies often deal with the not entirely novel themes of gender dynamics and power struggles, while his physical aesthetics, which sometimes combine Chinese martial arts, have future potential if developed beyond its appropriated physical aesthetics.

T.H.E. (The Human Experience) Dance Company, founded by Malaysia-born Kuik Swee Boon in 2008, has by far the most active presence in Singapore, sometimes staging up to four major dance productions a year. Known as the only professional contemporary Singapore dance company with five full-time dancers (along with a small team of administration personnel), T.H.E. also boasts a second company comprising younger, part-time dancers. The company, which tours frequently in the region's festivals, exhibits the strongest choreographic style and aesthetics amongst its Singapore peers, often expressing dark and violent physical sensibilities where the dancers' bodies are pushed to high-energy extremes during performance. Yet their consistent style may be in danger of turning repetitive, lacking enough physical creativity beyond the frenetic and the violent, or thoughtfulness beyond the moody themes of urban ennui, loneliness, and love and death. Nevertheless, T.H.E. provides much-needed professionalisation and concerted organisational efforts in dance in the city-state. One of their biggest contributions is the independent annual dance festival Contact, which showcases emerging dance talents from different parts of the world with a special focus on the Asian region, and consists of performances, work-in-progress showings, dance workshops and demonstration.

There is a distinctive Singapore situation here where arts groups have also become festival organisers in their own right. Theatre companies such as The Necessary Stage (TNS, founded 1987) and Wild Rice (founded 2000) have organised festival events alongside their usual annual programmes of performances and other educational and outreach activities. Since 2005, TNS has curated the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival<sup>52</sup> that offers smaller local as well as foreign performances centred on

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<sup>52</sup> The 'M1' refers to the main sponsor's name, a Singaporean telecommunications company.

different social themes each year such as 'Art and the People' (2014), 'Art and Entertainment' (2013), 'Art and Faith' (2012), 'Art and Education' (2011) and 'Art and the Law' (2010). Wild Rice on the other hand focuses on promoting new local theatre writing and performances with its biennial Singapore Theatre Festival, inaugurated in 2006. One way of reading the proliferation of these festivals is the proactive stances of arts groups in response to state cultural policies that encourage arts and cultural events of significant scales, like its emphasis on the Singapore Arts Festival, the Writers Festival and the visual art Biennale.

The dance companies described so far have one thing in common in that their choreographic styles and aesthetics more or less are centred on physical, kinetic expressions of the body where dance is perceived in its conventional mode as "a pure display of uninterrupted movement" (Lepecki 2006a, 7). By contrast, a small number of dance artists have begun to abandon the aesthetics of "uninterrupted movement", and adopt more "conceptual" modes of performance. Most notably, in the last ten years, solo dancers Daniel Kok and Joavien Ng have shifted their approaches from stylised and carefully composed movement to the presentation of ideas through other means such as lecture demonstrations.

Presently based in Brussels, Kok has to date staged several performances that explore variations on the spectator-performer relationship. *Q&A (Question and Answer, 2009)*, examined the cultural economy of dance through the relationship between spectator, performer and the dance product. This was followed by his investigations into dance as gift in *Gay Romeo* (2011), the performing self and the audience in *The Cheerleader* (2012) and notions of art and the community in *Space Monkey* (2013).

*Q&A* provides a good example of how Kok is exploring the intersections of dance practice and knowledge production. Consisting of three sections, Kok began *Q&A* with a seven-minute dance whose choreography was based on a lengthy survey that ascertained a Singapore audience's preferred dance and performance qualities. This was followed by a lengthy PowerPoint presentation explaining the survey, and

how the dance had been arrived at. In the final section of the performance, Kok invited audience members to choose from a variety of choreography, music and costume options to change his previous dance to suit their tastes.

The bulk of the performance in *Q&A* was concentrated on Kok's efforts to describe and explain the survey findings. A substantial 70-page report – that doubled as a performance programme – was also available to the audience for reference. The point was to quantify a formula for dance-making, and this was done with statistical data derived from a questionnaire as well as a qualitative survey using focus group interviews. Kok collaborated with an economist and a sociologist to formulate the surveys and this resulted in an “ideal” contemporary dance formula. For example, an ‘ideal design equation’ for the stage aesthetics was derived as “Design = 27.2% Lighting + 27% Sound + 17.3% Costumes & Props + 17% Stage Set + 11.5% Multimedia” (*‘Overall Design’ 2009, 49*). Indeed, a sizeable amount of facts and figures went into the making of Kok's dance piece.

The statistical element in *Q&A* echoed the Singapore government's well-known number-crunching approach to tracking the effectiveness of its social and cultural policies. For instance, statistical data in their numerous permutations and combinations proliferate throughout all three reports of the Renaissance City Plan helping to set the tone for future planning and for the implementation of infrastructure, human resource and funding allocation to stimulate positive growth in numbers of museum and gallery visitors, and participation in cultural events. The latest report, *Renaissance City Plan III*, proudly charts various instances of growth between 1996 and 2007 from “number of performances and visual arts exhibition days” (from 6,000 in 1996 to 27,000 in 2007), to “economic contribution” (from S\$557 million in 1996 to S\$978 million in 2006) (*Renaissance 2008, 9*). The report totals twelve impressive tables, graph charts, bar charts and graph charts to guide the reader through the myriad of statistics relating to arts and culture categorisations, ticket sales, performance and museum attendance breakdowns, and numbers of arts companies. The dazzling array of facts and figures behind Singapore's burgeoning arts and culture scene is no surprise for a government intent



on reaping “direct economic benefits that accrue to arts and cultural activities” (*Renaissance* 2000, 5).

By contrast, Singapore-based Joavien Ng focuses her performances on exploring alternatives to, rather than intensifications of, contemporary urban life. Past performances have dealt with the spatial configurations of urban living (*A Life Performance*, 2012), the interchangeability of lived experiences between two dancers (*Body Swap*, 2009), the conflation of fictive and factual identities (*The Diary of Alice*, 2010), and the modern-day body and self-image (*My Superhero*, 2012).

In *A Life Performance*, Ng took on the theme and issue of space, or the lack of it, in the small island-state. A common concern amongst Singaporeans are the social and economic consequences of a growing population of foreign skilled and unskilled labourers that the government views as necessary for continued economic and infrastructural growth. The text-driven performance saw Ng addressing the audience on how one should allocate, shape, and negotiate living and lived space. In response to the myriad public, economic and cultural policies that marshal the lives of citizens within the geographical and sociopolitical confines of Singapore, she offered ‘lifestyle alternatives’. Ng presented the audience with what she believed to be a fair share of the land she would like to be granted as a Singapore citizen: dividing available living space by the population, she arrived at the answer of “68.68 square metres” (*A Life Performance* 2012).

This share of the land was then represented by a white cut-out map of Singapore on which Ng performed for the remainder of the performance. As *A Life Performance* progressed, the audience was taken through Ng’s ways of and inhabiting her piece of land, with due consideration given to a lifestyle removed from the perceived materialistic ways of the majority of Singaporeans. Ng had also laid out various other cut-outs of a house, animals and vegetables to cover her Singapore map to suggest an alternative, sustainable lifestyle that consisted only of the bare essentials of a simple home and basic food needs.

The Singaporean citizen's life is often said to be driven by material measures of success, as summarised by a common 1990s catch phrase, the "5 C's of Singapore": "cash", "credit card", "car", "condominium", and "country club". The beginning of the 2000s saw a call for a gentler and more gracious Singapore society. Senior Minister and former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, suggested reinventing the five "C's" as: "a good Career", live in Comfort, surrounded by Children, and be Considerate and Charitable" ('Singapore's SM Goh' 2010). There seemed to be some kind of contestation in Ng's *A Life Performance* with her basic cut-outs of 'life's necessities', but as the performance progressed Ng demonstrated increasing emotional and physical tensions. Frustration mounted as Ng tried to squeeze between her cut-outs of house, animals and vegetables on her Singapore map where she could not fit comfortably. She even tried to contract her entire body so it could be physically accommodated in her small share of land, but to no avail. At the end of the performance, Ng opted to move away from her little island to search for other spaces and new ways of living.

In an article written more than ten years ago, Paul Rae highlighted the traits of Singaporean performers he had observed at the 2000 edition of Ong Keng Sen's intercultural Flying Circus Project. In his 'Rates of Exchange: The Flying Circus Project in the Context of Globalisation' (2001), Rae noted that the Singaporean performers were recognised not so much for their physical skills, as for being "generalists". Adept as "intermediaries and translators" they excelled in "their ability to absorb all stimuli, and respond rapidly and incisively". While Kok and Ng did have previous dance training, their recent performance strategies still echo Rae's observations in Kok's and Ng's "ability to absorb all stimuli, and respond rapidly and incisively" to their current sociocultural and political situations and conditions which they live and operate under. This is reflected in Kok's mimicry of the state's concern with cold statistical data translated into cultural and artistic achievement markers in *Q&A*, and Ng's physicalisation of Singapore's concerns on population and space sustainability in *A Life Performance*. These performances seem to only express and communicate topical sociocultural and political issues but lack certain critical responses to the issues highlighted. This is consistent with Rae's additional comments:

In this sense, they [the Singaporean performers] were defined by their abilities to *conceptualise*, even to the extent that their significant physical prowess was expected to be used primarily in a “conceptual” way. Within the Singaporean government’s rhetoric of the *hub*, this transcultural adaptability rendered them “knowledge workers” *par excellence*.

(2001, 198. Emphasis original)

Furthermore, the Renaissance City Plan Report stresses the importance of the knowledge worker in a particular manner:

To ensure sustained growth in the long run, Singapore must forge an environment that is conducive to innovations, new discoveries and the creation of new knowledge. Knowledge workers will gravitate towards and thrive in places that are vibrant and stimulating.

(*Renaissance 2000*, 5)

While consistent with the kinds of critical perspectives on cultural production outlined by Rae, the trend of the ‘conceptual’ dancer in Singapore is therefore especially complex, because it is arguably also in line with the government’s vision of the knowledge worker prized for her “innovations, new discoveries and the creation of new knowledge” (*Renaissance 2000*, 5). While both Kok and Ng previously trained in contemporary dance techniques and body skills, they now present performance lectures that explore various themes that actually involve the body in everyday social and cultural interactions. Whether or not they present new discoveries or offer new insights by critically assessing or even transgressing some of these issues must, for now, remain an open question.

One of the primary objectives of this thesis is to examine choreographic experimentation and innovation in relation to dancers who possess distinct classical background and training. Dancers such as Kok and Ng were trained in contemporary dance and body techniques. The kinds of insights and understandings derived from analysing Kok’s and Ng’s performance experimentations would indeed be very different as compared to the likes of Azanin Ahmad and Marion D’Cruz, or Klunchun and the Amrita dancers who all share the common traits of classical or traditional training. It must be said that this alternative cross-analysis between dancers with

classical and contemporary backgrounds is not within the scope of this thesis. However, the subject, along with its choreographic, aesthetic and political implications, clearly merits greater research attention. Nevertheless this particular section highlights how Singaporean dancers are reacting artistically in a particular way to their larger sociopolitical contexts of state-initiated social and cultural policies driven by global hub rhetorics. In other words, this section reinforces the view that distinct choreographic modernities will emerge in response to the differing modernising aspects impacting on particular societies and communities.

### **Beyond Capital: Personal and Informal Ties**

So far Bourdieu's notion of capital circulation have been applied in examining how institutions and events like Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival contribute to implementing state cultural policies in attaining Singapore's status of regional cultural hub. One of the implications of such precise "flexible statist management" (Wee 2007, 102) is that Singapore's cultural activities are run very much like a well-oiled private corporation, suggesting a direct correlation between arts and culture and financial profits. Subsequently I have briefly discussed how current Singaporean dance practitioners such as Kok and Ng respond to the nation-state's efficient method of social and cultural engineering with their performances. While the burgeoning Singaporean cultural hub is still critiqued as a transit trading site that manufactures non-local cultures, it bears reminding that my focus here is on foreign artists such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers in Singapore who have benefitted beyond the cold injection of funding and infrastructural support. In light of the state's perceived corporate machinery, more human and social factors have emerged.

As mentioned, one of the strengths in Singapore's "hub activities" is in the ability of centres like Esplanade and events like the Singapore Arts Festival to connect with and activate international arts networks and circuits. They have the ability to act as cultural brokers for the different artists and their works in connecting them to other artistic or funding opportunities. Although I have discussed this largely in structural terms thus far, it is imperative to pay attention to the importance of individual personnel who have developed their personal networks and relationships

in international arts circuits, either by working in institutions or have worked with them in the past. For instance, the successful commissioning and its subsequent performance tours of Amrita's *Crack* in the 2011 Singapore Arts Festival, mentioned in earlier sections, is due to the personal attention and cultivation of Low Kee Hong, the former festival general manager. Low introduced choreographer Arco Renz to the Cambodian organisation, and suggested that the two parties collaborate for a festival commission. He also initiated meetings with Franz Xaver Augustin, director of Goethe Indonesia and also regional director for Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand, to explore Goethe's funding possibilities for the commission.

Another example is Klunchun's *Nijinsky Siam*, which had its international premiere at the 2010 Singapore Arts Festival through its Singaporean producer Tang Fu Kuen. Tang brokered co-production initiatives for the performance between the Singapore Arts Festival, Theater Der Welt festival (Germany), Theater Spektakel (Zurich) and the Grand Theatre (Groningen, Netherlands). In fact it was Tang who initiated a meeting between Jérôme Bel and Klunchun that eventually materialised into the widely toured *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*. As producer and dramaturg for many dance artists in this region, Tang has built a performance presenter's portfolio through an extensive knowledge of Southeast Asian dance, along with his carefully cultivated European festival networks in the past 15 years. He has produced for dance artists such as Daniel Kok (Singapore), Choy Ka Fai (Singapore), Padmini Chettur (India), Jecko Siompo (Indonesia), and Nan Jombang company (Indonesia), touring in critically acclaimed European festivals such as In Transit (Berlin), Tanz Im August (Berlin), and Impulz Tanz (Vienna).

Last but not least, former director of the Singapore Arts Festival Goh Ching Lee also developed her personal arts networks to include the founding of regional networking platform the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals (AAPAF) in 2002. After leaving the festival in 2009, Goh founded CultureLink, a cultural consultancy, which represents and manages international performing artists as well as provides consultancy on cultural and arts management. CultureLink represents a broad range of performance groups such as Akram Khan Dance Company,

Singapore's T.H.E. Dance Company and TheatreWorks, China's Beijing Dance Theatre, and Taiwan's U-Theatre in terms of touring performances in Asia. In no small part, these individual cultural brokers have contributed to strengthening Singapore's reputation and position as a regional cultural hub where foreign artists like Klunchun and the Amrita dancers benefit.

Building on Rae's observation of Singaporeans as "intermediaries" (2001, 198) there is a common thread between the individual cultural brokers such as Low Kee Hong, Goh Ching Lee, Tang Fu Kuen and dancers like Kok and Ng in that they all exhibit competencies in their roles as 'middlemen' [*sic*]. While Low, Goh and Tang network to connect artists and festivals from one to another, Kok and Ng are seen as 'creative reproducers' of knowledge content that is re-presented in different performance modes on stage. The strength of the Singaporean citizen, and inevitably the nation on the whole, is to act as intermediaries or mediators in the dissemination of information, in the connection of different networks and in the closing of circuits. Ultimately the success of a hub does largely depend on these kinds of intermediaries and 'middle persons'; the Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival then are good illustrations of institutional and organisational artistic and cultural intermediaries in their supplementary functions.

More than that, activities of theatre and dance are social not only in the numerous kinds of relationship built between performer and the audience, and among the audience community. There are a variety of interpersonal relationships that are formed in post-performance gatherings and parties, and even just informal theatre foyer surveying socialising, where performance-makers, performers, producers and programmers nurture networks that lead to more artistic work or performance opportunities. Individuals such as Tang and Goh capitalise on these post-performance activities to build their cache of relationships that can potentially galvanise into official associations.

On an institutional front, Esplanade's biannual ConversAsians event, which was inaugurated in 2010, is an example of a formalised networking initiative that is

substantially attributed to human personnel such as arts officers and bureaucrats, programmers, producers, and other arts workers. ConversAsians was supposed to replace Esplanade's Asian Arts Mart, to take on a more substantial role than just a market place for arts practitioners, producers and programmers interested in 'shopping' for Asian arts. As promoted in its official 2014 website:

ConversAsians provides a platform to engage with contemporary Asian artists to build meaningful partnerships that will enable art to flourish. ConversAsians 2014 is the perfect opportunity for local artists to engage in dialogue and make connections with leading performing arts centres across Asia Pacific and leading artists from Asia.

(‘Welcome to ConversAsians’ 2014)

As a result, ConversAsians developed a broad spectrum of programmes that featured artists and arts practitioners in dialogue sessions, work-in-progress showings, performance showcases, dance and acting workshops, and informal social networking and exchange events. During ConversAsians 2010, Amrita presented *Khmeropedies I & II* as a work-in-progress, while choreographer Phuon participated in a dialogue session with Pichet Klunchun.

In fact, Esplanade's decision to present Amrita's *Khmeropedies I & II* arose due to their workshop-in-progress showing at ConversAsians 2010. In no small part, ConversAsians 2010 was the beginning of my dramaturgical relationship with Amrita Performing Arts. Amrita's executive director Fred Frumberg invited me to be dramaturg to assist with the fine-tuning of *Khmeropedies I & II* after he sought my opinions on the work-in-progress showing. After a brief meeting with choreographer Phuon, and being able to see eye to eye with each other, I accepted the invitation to be 'consultant dramaturg'. That led to my involvement as full-fledge dramaturg in Phuon's *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* at its conception stage. Hence, I was beneficiary of personal as well as institutional networks that were formalised under an event like ConversAsians.

In light of interpersonal relationships, Bourdieu's idea of "effort of sociability" in relation to social capital may sound like an arduous task in establishing relationships and networks, but it is also through formal and informal *socialising* that

Singaporean as well as foreign programmers, producers, and, arts officials and bureaucrats have the opportunity to get to know artists as individuals apart from their artistic products. Bourdieu's notion of "sociability" includes the power of acknowledgement, where persons or organisations with high social capital privileges them "being known to more people than they know" (1986, 252). In the push for a regional cultural hub, the state government recognises the creation of new knowledge and the importance of a shift towards a knowledge economy (Renaissance 2000, 5). While attention is focused on the intangible "new knowledge" and all the necessary requirements for its productivity, the knowledge worker, where the knowledge economy actually stems from, is not given much attention.<sup>53</sup>

Having said that, commissioning bodies such as Esplanade and the Singapore Arts Festival invest in human social relations in terms of getting to know foreign artists and the different sociocultural, political and personal dispositions that ultimately inform their art works. An understanding of the artist with individual personality traits, eccentricities, and indeed limitations can determine future relationships and potential networks that can be developed further, or not. And, the same is true in reverse for the artist who is developing new relationships with foreign organisations, programmers and commissioning institutions. There must be an initial 'chemistry' or synergy not just in terms of work goals and achievements on both parties but also in terms of 'matches' in personality traits and work culture and ethics.

More than getting acquainted with the artist and her motivations for and behind her artworks, there is also the gesture of hospitality that lends itself to cementing social relations and ties, which is of particular significance in an Asian context. For example, Klunchun and his dancers were provided with premium service apartment suites for accommodation during their Singapore artist-residence. Medical emergencies experienced by two of Klunchun's dancers during their Singapore stay were also immediately attended to with the assistance of Esplanade

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<sup>53</sup> This observation very well extends to migrant labour in other industries, such as domestic help to manual construction, where their productivity is the primary concern while safety, welfare and other human rights issues become increasingly overlooked in varying degrees by multinational employers.



programmers. There are of course hardships associated with touring performances and foreign residencies, but visiting artists are more inclined to return to places that can assure them acceptable levels of comfort, safety and security. Just as there is a desire to seek outstanding and singular art works that would yield high cultural and symbolic capital, the forging of interpersonal social ties with the particular artist helps to strengthen the professional relationship. It may be the case of who you know that gets you somewhere initially but it's also *how* you know whom that sustains and develops your present position.

### **Choreography of the Hub**

Thus far I have described and examined the different kinds of multi-layered relationships and connections that have emerged between local and foreign dancers and Singapore in light of the city-state's goal of attaining the status of regional cultural hub. There is a ground-up cumulative effect that begins with individuals in their roles as arts and cultural brokers who, in their various capacities, secure all sorts of networks, circuits and relationships. Different collectives or groups of these cultural brokers may also work within arts and cultural institutions and events that possess or build distinct organisational and institutional ties and connections that enable even more production of art works and performances, as well as nurturing and/or supporting artists in various disciplines. Finally, the number of institutions and events, which are driven by specific cultural policies, combine to act for a state in its bid to become a hub for global arts and cultural networks.

Appadurai contends that "we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterized by objects in motion" and that we live in a world of "flows" where objects include "ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques" (2001, 5). In Singapore's goal to become a regional hub, material (money, theatres, museums), goods (art works and performances), people (cultural brokers, festival programmers, artists, and dancers), ideas (commissions and co-productions), ideologies (institutional missions), technologies (stage craft) and techniques (choreographic and theatre styles) are involved in the flows and motion; they are the tangible and intangible economic, cultural, social and

symbolic capital in real terms that are transmitted and circulated. Moreover Sloterdijk states that “modernizations always have the character of *mobilizations*” ([1989] 2009, 9. Emphasis in original). Therefore it is the Singapore government and its cultural policies that initially mobilises its economic resources to many different industries to stimulate infrastructural growth that will cultivate more cultural capital, hence putting the circulatory system of different capital flows in motion.

That is only a partial picture as Sloterdijk also qualifies that “in modernity, the self-movements of the world originate from *our self-movements*” ([1989] 2009, 3. Emphasis mine). As much as there is institutional mobilisation in stimulating all sorts of capital, there are individual ‘middle persons’, cultural brokers, producers, and even artists, who are also just as mobile in parlaying their connections and relationships to productive means. These individuals literally travel from one theatre to another, from one festival in one country to another festival in another, moving within and between different arts circuits and networks to initiate productions and commissions in their own ways. Their personal negotiations and manoeuvres suggest a constant ‘social dance’ as they meet and interact with different interested individuals and parties. Hence the flows and motion of a cultural hub, which are initially complicated by the circulating flows of numerous intangible and tangible capital, are then further layered with the motion of human movements and mobilities.

If choreography is to be understood as a series of movements that are arranged or organised in a particular order by utilising certain aesthetics, bodies, talents and skills, then Singapore’s activities of capital mobilisation along with human movements of artistic and cultural production as well as management can be said to demonstrate choreographic traits and qualities. In other words it is a choreography consisting of movements and mobilities of people (artists, programmers, producers), things (artworks and performances) and ideas (potential new works, commissions, collaborations). This choreography contributes to a national level performance of the city-state as a Global City of the Arts, and, as a Cultural Capital of Asia. Singapore’s performance as a Global City, in turn, possesses

actual and potential multiple international networks and relationships with other global cities, international arts networks, foreign cultural circuits, and so on. To extend the analogy, the Singapore government then produces its own 'choreographic modernity' in its mobilisation and movement of people, things and ideas to realise its cultural policies.

As a result, international and regional dancers such as Klunchun and the Amrita dancers then become part of the city-state's 'choreographic modernity' of a regional hub. If we examine specifically *Black and White*, Klunchun was invited by Esplande's Da:ns Festival to create an entirely new performance, based on a personal recommendation of a programmer. The creation of the new performance entails calculated organisation and marshaling of the festival's financial, material and technical resources – another level of choreographic activity – to support Klunchun's company: from the programmer arranging for sponsored accommodation to organising special previews for critical feedback, not to mention the assembling of theatre technical staff and personnel. At the same time, Klunchun also organises his dancers along with their specific physical aesthetics, talents and skills to produce new ways of dancing, their distinct choreographic modernities as it were. Rehearsal and creation activities that begin in Klunchun's Bangkok dance studio then move and travel as his company flies to Singapore to complete their residency and eventually premiere the work in the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

In view of these kinds of carefully coordinated activities, *Black and White* then can be thought of as a part of Singapore's choreographic modernity that was born out of the city-state's chase for a global modernity. The mobilisation of movements and flows does not stop there either. *Black and White* as a finished cultural product now leaves Singapore and enters into global choreographies of human movement and capital mobilisation from different national and transnational networks and connections to develop evermore pathways in touring performances.

## CONCLUSION

### **Choreographic Modernities and Their Qualities**

The emergence of choreographic modernities has been examined and analysed in broadly two ways in this thesis. Firstly, the ‘bookend’ chapters that establish the larger social, cultural, political and economic contexts within specific locations reveal the factors that contribute to choreographic modernities. In Chapter 1, the social and cultural politics of a modernising Malaysia past and present, resulted in different choreographic modernities for choreographers Azanin Ahmad and Marion D’Cruz. Their choreographic modernities diverged in aesthetics and content due to their different cultural backgrounds: one being supported and the other marginalised, by state-driven social and cultural policies. In the case of Singapore in Chapter 6, specific cultural and social policies were put in place by the government to promote the city-state as a regional and global cultural hub. In broad terms, the city-state can be considered to have produced choreographic modernities of cultural flow and motion through its concerted commissioning and programming activities with foreign organisations such as Pichet Klunchun Dance Company and Amrita Performing Arts.

Secondly, the central section of four chapters deals with choreographic modernities in a progressive manner, which highlights the constitutive qualities at the ‘micro-levels’ of dance-making, performance practice, and professionalisation. The first chapter – Chapter 2 – examines the internal feature of classical dance rhythms and how they were transformed to produce choreographic modernities for Klunchun and Amrita dancers Belle and Kethya. The progression gradually moves to examine ‘external’ features. In Chapter 3, Klunchun’s and Phon’s re-signification and redistribution of classical gestures and characterisation respectively, result in choreographic modernities that contribute to different articulations of individuality, and self- and artistic identity. The single performer is then extended to a collective of individuals in Chapter 4, where the reconfiguration of the Amrita dancers as an ensemble in performance produces a choreographic modernity that give rise to affective expressions – and also less successful reconfigurations that fall short of

choreographic modernities in the case of Klunuchun's dancers. Last but not least, in Chapter 5, we travel even farther and wider by juxtaposing local and global modernities – from long-haul travel to different body cultures and disciplines – experienced by the Amrita dancers, that then create choreographic modernities with implications beyond their immediate artistic concerns of dance-making and performance, relating to broader aspects of modern life.

Having said that, the cumulative quality of the analyses in Chapters 2 through 5 must be reiterated. There is the progressive examination of dance at 'micro-levels', from internal rhythms within the dancing body to embodiments of physical gestures and characterisation, to even broader socio-cultural and socio-political contexts involving global rhythms and body cultures. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, the illustrations of Klunuchun and the Amrita dancers working in Singapore demonstrate that their choreographic modernities are also implicated at 'macro-levels' of institutional and state level cultural and political 'choreographies'. Aspects of regional financial capital and knowledge economy flows, international artistic and organisational networks, and, multinational collaborations in Singapore ultimately become enablers for Klunuchun and the Amrita dancers to develop their choreographic modernities at more focused and material levels. Due to various infrastructural support measures, they can concentrate on the artistic and creative aspects of their contemporary dance innovation.

The Da:ns Festival's funding capacities, for instance, facilitated Klunuchun's *Black and White* in 2011 where he could materialise his artistic vision with particular emergent choreographic modernities, as examined in Chapters 2 and 4. In the same vein Amrita gained a fresh dance vocabulary to address new performance narratives when the Singapore Arts Festival commissioned *Crack*. This then inevitably led to multiple touring and festival networking opportunities. Close examination of specific dance elements in the 'core chapters' reveal complex transformative processes in emergent artistic innovation that are attributed to the very act and material of dance. Yet, when read alongside local and global social, cultural and political contexts, there are choreographic modernities that go beyond dance aesthetics.

Other than networking and touring opportunities, for example, additional international funding and exposure also mean that artistic directors such as Klunchun can acquire and improve stage and company management skills that allow them to engage with foreign arts networks more effectively and efficiently. On the other hand, individual artists such as the Amrita dancers also gain insights into different dancemaking methods and strategies that they then apply to their own choreographies in their home country, as described in Chapter 5. All these constitute choreographic modernities at 'macro' levels of dance production and management.

### **Circular Choreographic Modernities**

The processes of choreographic modernities are complex and contingent on specific conditions and situations that are encountered by the dancers (and indeed bureaucrats and arts administrators) in each of these chapters. Nevertheless there are a few common observations that can be made from the case studies that have been covered. Choreographic modernities exhibit two main traits: first, they are transmitted in circulatory trajectories, and second, they are the result of specific processes of *refraction*. In the first instance, different degrees of change and deviation result in a variety of choreographic modernities. For example, Azanin developed her style of dance dramas through the seamless 'stitching' of different Malay classical movements and gestures, and even D'Cruz, who opted for everyday movements and gestures, developed them into physical political enactments on stage. There is also Belle and Kethya who together created their dance sequence when they improvised with classical rhythms while Klunchun's dancers moved in new ways when their Khon rhythms were destabilised. Subsequently, Klunchun's experimental performances gave rise to the individual with his self-identity when he reassigned the meaning of the *jeeb* and Phon's experimentation with his classical monkey resulted in a modern artistic identity. In these examples the force of change and deviation in classical choreographic aesthetics produce new dance movements and emergent identities. So do the Amrita dancers with their becomings-monkey ensemble and Klunchun's dancers with their becomings-monkey-demon formations that are

produced by diversifying and reorganising inherent qualities of their classical ensemble in performance.

These new movement vocabularies, emergent individual artistic intent, and alternative collectivised performance also then effect a change in their performances in which the choreographic modernities are found. Referring to Amrita's *Source/Primate* performance, the multiplicities of new monkey gestures and movements that result in their becomings-monkey, is also another form of choreographic modernity. This becomings-monkey then reconfigures the way the Amrita dancers perform as an ensemble on stage, which then contributes to a new performance – *Source/Primate* – itself. As I have elaborated in Chapter 4, the Amrita dancers' choreographic modernities are the new monkey gestures and movements as well as the resulting emergent collective identities on stage.

There is a circular trajectory of particular 'micro-level' dance elements such as rhythm, gesture, or character that gives rise to even more choreographic modernities, which eventually constitute the entire performance. The wider implication would be that choreographic modernities within one performance can then be transferred, referenced or even further transformed in the making of other performances and even creation processes. A case in point is the development of D'Cruz's choreographic modernities of everyday movements and gestures, the bodily *hexis*, which contribute to a succession of performances *Immigrant in Bangsar* to *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya*. Another example is Klunchun's preoccupation with the self in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself, I Am Demon, About Khon* and *Nijinsky Siam*. On a broader perspective, circulatory effects are also observed in Chapter 6 when the Singapore government's 'choreography' or mobilisation of economic capital to acquire cultural capital that then in turn produces more cultural, social and symbolic capital within and beyond the city-state.

## Refracted Choreographic Modernities

Choreographic modernities can also be 'refracted' outcomes of different or multiple modernities impacting on the dancers' originating dance aesthetics, conventions or even ideologies. By 'refracted' I mean that these choreographic modernities are not limited to dance innovation or new modes of performance. Instead, they extend and relate to different aspects of the dancers' 'lives at large' such as their livelihood, the way they manage and structure their artistic practices, or their socioeconomic, sociocultural and political motivations. For instance, Amrita dancers such as Phon, Belle and Kethya, who have been learning new dance techniques in numerous workshops and performances, continually widen their dance repertoires, and this translates into increased income. This new income then enables the dancers to shape a different lifestyle in their home city of Phnom Penh, along with a reconfiguration of their working patterns. As discussed in earlier chapters, Phon and Belle are presently freelance artists who juggle a few jobs as touring contemporary performers, respected local classical masters and commercial dancers/choreographers. Conversely, when the Malaysian government changed track in its cultural and religious policies toward Islamisation, Azanin's dance dramas did not receive as much attention as they had before. D'Cruz on the other hand developed new aesthetic and political sensibilities during her New York stint that contributed to the emergence of a political artist.

These kinds of 'refracted choreographic modernities' also result from the dynamic tensions that occur in situations and conditions where Klunchun, the Amrita dancers, Azanin, D'Cruz, and even Singapore's Daniel Kok and Joavien Ng choreograph and dance. These dynamic tensions occur when multiple modernities engage with one another to produce either positive or negative effects. For instance, Klunchun's earlier involvement in Khon experimentation, including *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* with Jérôme Bel, was criticised by some of his Khon peers and masters, not only for disrespecting the classical form by experimenting with it, but also for teaching (Western) foreigners misguided facts about the art form. This particular group of conservative Khon practitioners can be said to represent a certain 'counter-modernity' who prefer to preserve and perpetuate traditions in their entirety. While



he never received acknowledgement from his Khon peers and masters, since the international touring success of *Nijinsky Siam* and *Black and White*, Klunchun's contemporary Khon performances have slowly developed another audience base. These new audience members are young modern urbanites who live and work in Bangkok city centre, who are curious about the Khon form but are relatively disinterested in spectacles like the annual Queen Sirikit Birthday Khon performances. The irony lies in the fact that many of Klunchun's Khon peers, some who are considered rising stars or young masters of the art, are usually involved in the royal Khon performance. Through his Khon innovation, Klunchun has also started to attract Westernised modern, young Bangkok urbanites to his regular classical Khon performances in his outdoor theatre. As one community of 'counter-modernity' rejects Klunchun, another more progressive group begins to appreciate that Klunchun's choreographic modernities are situated in local traditions. In this particular instance, however, it must be said, that not all resolute Khon practitioners are completely against experimentation with the classical form. Klunchun's own teacher, the late Master Chayot Khumanee, gave Klunchun his blessings to experiment with Khon.

### **'Conjunctural' Multiple Modernities**

Dynamic tensions between local and global modernities constantly occur as a nation's sociocultural, economic and political conditions fluctuate at different degrees and rates. Consequently, localised forms of legitimised – state or official – modernising mechanisms also work to cause different kinds of social, cultural, economic and political inequality. In late 2013 transitioning into 2014, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia continue to encounter different political, sociocultural and economic challenges, as illustrated below.

Thailand's clash between pro-government supporters (the "Red Shirts") and the anti-government protestors (the "Yellow Shirts"), which began in 2006, flared up again in late 2013 with four protesters killed and over a hundred injured (Campbell 2013, [www.world.time.com](http://www.world.time.com)). At almost the same time, Cambodia also had its share of social protests where "tens of thousands" of demonstrators marched through the

capital Phnom Penh in protest of the nearly three decade “rule” of the authoritarian Prime Minister Hun Sen (Fuller 2013, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)). A few days later, a smaller protest was held in Phnom Penh by garment workers demanding higher wages. Three of the protestors were reported killed by shots fired by Cambodian security forces (Mullany 2014, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)).

Tensions over religious issues in Malaysia continued to build when the local appeals court ruled that the term *Allah* (Arabic: God) must be exclusive to the Muslim faith in the country. This overturned a 2009 lower court ruling, which said non-Muslims could use the term in their worship and literature. The Malaysian Christian community argued that the use of *Allah* in Malay versions of the Bible had been practised for centuries (‘Malaysia Court Rules’ 2013, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)). Controversy on the *Allah* matter escalated when the Selangor state Islamic religious department raided the Bible Society of Malaysia and confiscated 300 copies of the Bible in Malay and Iban<sup>54</sup> Languages (Gomez 2014, [www.themalaysianinsider.com](http://www.themalaysianinsider.com)).<sup>55</sup> Last but not least, Singapore was plagued by its worst outbreak of violence in more than 40 years when more than 400 South Asian workers rioted in the city, damaging police vehicles and injuring 18 people (Neo and Chia 2013, [www.todayonline.com](http://www.todayonline.com)). This re-opened public and government debates over the treatment of migrant workers, and population growth.

The above examples of social, cultural, political and economic conflicts and entanglements between the local and the foreign are consistent with what Appadurai characterises as “relations of disjunctures” due to uneven or inequitable flows of information, images, goods, people and ideas from one place to another (2001, 5). His own examples include the international media that produce “images of well-being” that cannot be attained under certain local living standards and

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<sup>54</sup> The indigenous Iban people belong to the larger Dayak group who live mainly in the eastern Malaysian state of Sarawak.

<sup>55</sup> Complicating the issue even further, Malaysian Catholic priest Father Lawrence Andrew was also investigated by the police under the country’s Sedition Act, “for saying the word Allah will continue to be used in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) services in churches” in the state of Selangor. The Catholic priest’s comment was considered a direct challenge to an edict by the Sultan of Selangor, who had prohibited the usage of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims (Darwis 2014, [www.themalaysianinsider.com](http://www.themalaysianinsider.com)).

consumer capabilities, and how foreign discourses of human rights that assist in achieving local justice are instead repressed by local hegemonic economic or socio-political forces (2001, 6). While cultural studies scholars rehearse the 'evils of globalisation' (Appadurai 1996; Giddens 1990, 1991; Harvey 1989) in relation to larger communities and societies which are socio-politically and socioeconomically in the minority outside the West, there are also numerous benefits and advantages to the opening up of global networks and connections to particular individuals and smaller groups. Cases in point are the individual artists and their immediate communities who have benefitted in a variety of ways by negotiating the dynamic tensions that come with the intermingling and intersections of multiple modernities.

Klunchun and the Amrita dancers actually benefit from their global mobility in a broad spectrum of ways, from specific choreographic modernities that develop their dance practices, to the impact on their livelihood, to ways in which they develop their organisational skills and expertise in arts and cultural management. D'Cruz's New York stint afforded her new aesthetics and choreographic ideologies that may have seemed initially unintelligible to Malaysian dance audiences. Over time her audiences, however, have come to see their value not just from an aesthetic standpoint but also as a valued alternative political medium and civic voice. The situations of these artists are not so much about "relations of disjuncture" but more of 'relations of mutual conjuncture' between the dancers and their foreign encounters with individuals like fellow dancers, choreographers and cultural brokers, and with organisations such as festivals, funding commissions, and performance venues. As stressed by Subrahmanyam, different modernities or particular periods are linked or associated by global as well as conjunctural traits (1998, 99). Conjunctural traits of arts and cultural innovation and production furnish Klunchun's company, D'Cruz, Azanin, Amrita Performing Arts, Kok and Ng with strong global networks and connections to the likes of seemingly disparate and mutually exclusive aesthetic and choreographic ideas, alternative politics, body techniques, funding, sponsorship, individuals, organisations and institutions at different times and spaces.

Two recent events that are reflections of Phnom Penh's growing contemporary arts and cultural development serve to illustrate the idea of 'relations mutual conjuncture' further. Firstly, a Cambodian visual culture conference in Siem Reap at the end of 2013 caused a stir among local as well as international academics when Cambodian-born, US-based art academic Phally Chroy raised his concern over disruptive non-Cambodian forces in local contemporary art. Chroy was quoted in saying that, historically, traditional art in Cambodia was a utility that served cultural and social functions in local communities, but that contemporary art in Cambodia is "only for the concern of the non-Cambodians" while Cambodian artists make contemporary art mainly as a source of income and an opportunity to travel (Jackson 2013, [www.phnompenhpost.com](http://www.phnompenhpost.com)).

Amrita director Kang Rithisal was quoted as countering that Cambodian art had always been influenced by the economic, social and political conditions of a particular time, and the current contemporary art scene is no different. Kang also elaborated on the classical Cambodian dance where:

the dancer was used to relay messages between the earth and heaven, from the human being to God. ... So at the time what we call classical dance now was a new creation in response to the political situation at the time.

(quoted in Jackson 2013, [www.phnompenhpost](http://www.phnompenhpost))

While they may be some basis for Chroy's criticisms, his statements are highly generalised. Many young Cambodian artists in various disciplines are trying to respond to their rapidly changing environment through an art that is rooted in local tradition. Aside from Amrita Performing Arts, there is also the successful Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), established in 2009 by local Khmer opera artist Arn Chorn-Pond, which focuses on developing sustainability programmes for local arts and culture. Earlier in April and May 2013, CLA joined forces with Amrita's administrative and management personnel, namely director Kang Rithisal and executive director Fred Frumberg, to organise the 'Season of Cambodia', a two-month festival in New York that featured 125 Cambodian artists from visual arts, music, dance and drama, and featured classical as well as contemporary forms.

The second event is seemingly more minor, but is also telling. Fred Frumberg

moved to Singapore in September 2013, to work as Director of Production on the new Singapore International Festival of Arts, which will begin in 2014, under artistic director Ong Keng Sen. Since his new appointment in Singapore, Frumberg has become chairman of the board of directors in Amrita. Frumberg moved to Phnom Penh in 1997, as an UNESCO consultant initially, to assist in the revival of Cambodian classical art forms. He then founded Amrita Performing Arts in 2003 and has since been involved in the administrative, creative and artistic direction of the organisation. Prior to his Cambodian activities, Frumberg was already an established stage manager in American and European opera houses and theatre venues, working with directors such as Peter Sellers, Francesca Zambello and Deborah Warner. Frumberg's work experience, spanning the diverse modernities of the US and Europe, and Cambodia along with the Southeast Asian region, makes him an ideal arts and culture specialist for a regional hub like Singapore. Frumberg can competently wield not just numerous arts and cultural connections between the West and Southeast Asia, but he can also expertly mediate between sometimes subtle but different work cultures and ethos of the two separate sociocultural regions.

In these two examples, the idea of 'relations of mutual conjuncture' act in different ways. The first example highlights that even autochthonous cultural expressions and forms need to transform and mutate to respond to different periods of time or distinctive modernities within the country rather than be externally influenced. The mutual conjuncture lies in different periods of modernity within one geopolitical boundary. The second example draws attention to the fact that experiences of different modernities – from the West to the Southeast Asian region, in this case – yield opportunities for advancement and benefit rather than shortcomings and detriment.

### **Choreographic Modernities and Social Movements**

In Chapter 4, I highlighted the wider implications of choreographic modernities beyond immediate performance innovation. To reiterate briefly, the choreographic modernities of reconfigured movements, gestures and collective identities in the dance ensembles of *Source/Primate* and *Black and White* point to

how the audience can be organised or ‘choreographed’ into new modes of experiencing dance. Particularly, audience members now perceive these experimental works through affect and kinaesthesia as opposed to classical conventions of representation and linear storytelling. The question then is whether there are any further lessons that can be learned through choreographic modernities that extend beyond the theatre. One way is to examine the relationship between dance, choreography and the social.

Throughout this thesis, the classical dances of Khon, Lakhon Kaol, Robam Kbach Boran and Malay dance have been examined as mainly aesthetic forms. The dance aesthetics also play social and cultural roles in their communities. For example, the Ramayana stories have long served to reinforce positive personal as well as communal behaviour and ethics. The narratives that are communicated through song, gesture and movements provide certain social rubrics that keep a community in check, to keep social order in ensuring harmony and cohesion within the community. Following Foucault’s argument that “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, “docile” bodies” (1977, 138), dance technique or discipline – the physical form of the dance itself – by that very term also constitutes a form of control over the body that is dictated by a set of sociocultural norms and practices. Expanding on this concept, one way of viewing choreography is as the practice of mobilising, composing and arranging social formations within a specific society with its own sociocultural parameters.

The dance disciplines I have focused on were initially created in a different period of modernity: Khon, Lakhon Kaol, Robam Boran, Terinai, Joget Gamelan and Tari Asyik, share similar origins in royal court art forms. The forms of Robam Boran and Khon have been closely associated with – in fact directly supported and nurtured by – their respective Cambodian and Thai royal courts since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century for various social, cultural as well as international diplomatic reasons (Phim and Thompson 1999, 38-44; Rutnin 1993, 104-108). Azanin and her Malay dance dramas possessed powerful cultural capital during Malaysia government’s push for a Malay modernity in the 1980s. Additionally the cultural symbol of court dances, like

Terinai and Joget Gamelan, were also closely associated with the sultanate, which to date still has certain symbolic power in among Malay communities.

With the modernising aspect of democracy coming into play in varying degrees and forms in the contemporary political arenas of Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia, public and civil groups have also risen to prominence in these nations. Klunchun and the Amrita dancers are parts of an artistic community that participates in society at large. As members of their society, these dancers express their thoughts, ideas and identities through their dance. While they are committed to preserving and promoting their classical heritage, they are also aware of the changing sociocultural, political and economic climate in their countries. The classical forms as choreographic modernities of their time may not be adequate to express and communicate the tensions found in the dancers' present-day experiences. Hence they create variations, deviations and transformations of body technique, and more open body disciplines with different multiplicities, which are indicative of the multiple modernities they encounter in their art and daily lives. The classical heritage from which they innovate their choreographic modernities do not perish, but become more relatable to present times.

For Randy Martin, the concept of mobilisation centres on "what moving bodies accomplish through movement" and it also "foregrounds the process of how bodies are made, how they assembled" (1998, 4). Social mobilisation would then constitute how social bodies are made and assembled. As embodied sociocultural disciplines and practices, Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers' choreographic modernities hold the potential to mobilise or organise different or alternative social orderings beyond the traditional or conventional. These alternative social mobilisations in contemporary times would also reflect current civic and political movements in their respective Thai and Cambodian societies, for "politics goes nowhere without movement" (Martin 1998, 3). By implication, dancers involved in the choreographic modernities of *Khmeropedies I & II*, *Nijinsky Siam*, *Black and White*, *Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate* and *Crack* then become immediate participants and embodiments of alternative social mobilisations. As demonstrated

in Chapter 4, the ripple effect then also gradually transforms audience perceptions and viewpoints thereby involving their participation in the potential for alternative social re-organisations as well.<sup>56</sup>

Numerous dance scholars have investigated the relationship between the mobilisation of social groups and choreography. Foster's 'Choreographies of Protest' (2003) and Martin's 'Toward a Kinesthetics of Protest' (2006) highlight the correlation between choreography and mobilisation of civil groups into specific political demonstrations and protests, but they focus on the mobilisation or choreography of Western bodies with everyday movements and gestures. Klunchun's and the Amrita dancers' culturally specific choreographic modernities address and relate to their immediate sociocultural and socio-political milieu. As Martin writes, "[I]ike dance itself, politics must be situated in order to take responsibility for the scene whence I speak" (1998, 15).

The political potential of choreographic modernities have already been suggested at 'micro levels' in fluctuating rhythms that subvert dominant forms, emergent alternative identities that are in opposition with community practices; and alternative artistic as well as social lives as substitutes for older paradigms. The cumulative forces or power of these choreographic modernities, however, result in alternative ordering or organisation of social formations in society at large. As an example of the cultural specificities of Klunchun's choreographic concerns, he has in the past related the "Red Shirts"/"Yellow Shirts" situation to the conception of *Black and White*. During rehearsal, Klunchun has spoken of how he sees the ambiguous nature of the fight/support dance segments in *Black and White* representing the opposing forces of the two political demonstrators. For him, the element of balance is perhaps a solution, where both civil society groups work together to achieve a peaceful country. This is reiterated in an interview Klunchun gave:

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<sup>56</sup> This has implications for the efficiency and effectiveness of D'Cruz's political choreographies that employ everyday movements and gestures but the Malaysian choreographer works in a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious society unlike the seemingly homogenous societies in Thailand and Cambodia, even if it is in state rhetoric.



Since we had the coup in 2006, there has been significant disunity in Thai society: the red and the yellow shirts. ... I was frustrated as to why Thai people acted like enemies to each other. ... For *Black & White*, it is this feeling that I want to talk to the Thai society and others, and that we should transform conflict to support in order to develop the country and create positive results.

(Belarmino 2011, [www.timeoutsingapore.com](http://www.timeoutsingapore.com))

As for the Amrita dancers such as Phon, Belle and Kethya, they predominantly perform in other choreographies by foreign choreographers. Nevertheless, choreographic modernities in – and like – *Khmeropedies I & II*, (as examined in Chapter 2 and 3) in which all three dancers were involved, already suggest potential new social and cultural formations when they experiment with their classical rhythms, gestures and movements. As an on-going research project, it would be interesting to observe further developments of the Amrita dancers in their choreographic modernities that can potentially have even more significance on mobilising social movements in the future, which is beyond the current scope of this thesis.

On a final note regarding choreographic modernities as alternative social formations, Appadurai suggests a social force that he calls “mobile civil forms”. He elaborates that this particular social form is able to resist the politics of unregulated capital and the enforced stability of hegemonic state machinery (2001, 6-7). He also claims that this “mobile civil form” is born out of the imagination, where:

On the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled – by states, markets, and other powerful interests. But is [*sic*] it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge.

(2001, 6)

Perhaps another way to look at Appadurai’s “mobile civil forms” are the very choreographic modernities where the imagination is materialised into social and political movements through dance. It must be iterated, however, that the potential of dance and choreography in mobilising social movements in separate sociocultural and socio-political milieus must be regarded in tandem with the larger society,

where mass direct action such as protests and demonstrations in the streets of Bangkok and Phnom Penh are already taking place this very moment. So, such present ground activities may very well further fuel the potential – and its realisation – of dance as social movement and civic mobilisation.

This thesis focuses on the choreographic modernities of dance practitioners predominantly from Thailand and Cambodia, with supplementary historical and institutional contexts from Malaysian choreographers and Singaporean cultural producers. There are still possibilities of extending this particular paradigm of dance experimentation and modernity to emergent choreographic practices in other parts of this region. Countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam are still producing contemporary dance practices that are rooted in classical or traditional conventions. For that matter, there are other younger classical dancers in Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia who are also coming to the fore with their experimentation. The complicated flows, refractions, overlaps and intersections in the choreographic practices of Klunchun, the Amrita dancers, Azanin and D’Cruz already reveal rich and intricate details of their located modernities. To extend the study to other parts of the region would further intensify and yet draw focus to the complexities of distinct and located modernities and their impacts on dance, choreography and social mobilisation, and vice versa.

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