

Changes in Space, Place and the Role of Thai Classical Puppet Theater “Joe Louis”

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Abstract

The purpose of this article aims to analyze the Changes in space, place and the role of Thai Classical Puppet Theater “Joe Louis” in relation to distance, culture and identity. The objectives are 1) the role of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre nowadays and 2) changes in space, place, distance and mapping of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre. The results found that the traditional Thai Small Puppets used to be a mass performance which open to the public and performed widely all around the country evidenced in historical records regarding the employment of puppet performances as major entertainment on various occasions. Nowadays, Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has changed from a mass performance to a specialized performance in a special occasion (especially international level) in order to show national’s heritage. There are changes in distance of the performance of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre that is getting more into a combination of social and personal distance. The puppet troupe adapted themselves to the changing society in order to serve the urban people’s culture by decreasing their space and boundaries more into a local performance. Changes in economic and social interaction are directly affected the puppet troupe. Joe Louis Puppet Theatre maintaining their identity in their connection with the song, arts and dance through the place which is a restaurant. A specialized performance has been formed to serve people in a special occasion. At present, some adjustment was made. The performances the theatre offered became more modern, as their clientele are primarily tourists, and the style of the shows was adjusted in terms of the contents of the show that is separated into short episodes.

Keywords: Changes, Puppet Theater, Role, Adaptation

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Background

The Thai Classical Small Puppet Theater “Joe Louis” has been honored by various organizations both in the government and private sectors. Using full-bodied puppets, meaning that they have arms, legs, torsos and heads. Some individual parts of the puppets such as the necks and fingers on the hands can also be manipulated by ropes and pulleys. The performance can take up to three puppeteers to operate one puppet at a time. Joe Louis Puppet theatre has become widely known and admired among the Thai audience and foreign visitors to Thailand.

From year 2001, The Joe Louis Puppet Troupe put on nightly shows at Suan Lum Night Bazaar in Bangkok, but then the troupe nearly collapsed in 2004 because of the financial problems, then was saved and funds were raised at that time.

After their resurrection, the Joe Louis puppet troupe has won the highest award in puppetry at the World Festival of Puppet Art (which was held in Prague), for the category of “Best Traditional Performance” in 2006, and after the death of Sakorn Yang-keawsot (Joe Louis Puppet Theatre founder) in 2007, several of his children and grandchildren have continued to keep the art of Thai puppetry alive by improving better stages, costumes and props to make the shows more attractive for the audience and then the troupe has won the “Best Performance Award” in 2008 at the Thai national awards.

Joe Louis Puppet Theatre officially opened in 2002, but was renamed in 2004

by HM the King’s oldest sister, HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana. The new title was “Nattayasala Hun Lakorn Lek (Joe Louis)” known in English as “The Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre” which remains the last of Thai traditional puppet show in the Kingdom of Thailand, but now this kind of performance seems to be fading away from Thai society.

Objectives

This article aims to analyze the Changes in space, place and the role of Thai Classical Puppet Theater (Joe Louis) in relation to culture and identity in which objectives are

- The role of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre nowadays.
- Changes in space, place, distance and mapping of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre.

Changes of Thai Classical Puppet Theater The role of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre.

The first puppet performance in Thailand started during the Ayutthaya period called “Hun Luang” known as Royal Puppet. Puppets were performed only during royal functions or within the royal palace. Later, during the reign of King Rama 4, small puppets or “Hun Lek” performed Niew Jeen (Chinese Opera) and the Ramayana along with “Hun Kabok” or Stick Puppet and then Hun Lakorn Lek otherwise known as Traditional Thai Small Puppets became a mass performance which open to the public and performed widely all around the country.

Joe Louis puppet Theatre once located at Suan Lum Night Bazaar near Silom

Complex (2001) with loads of little stores and behind the park. The night market and the restaurants behind the park are crowded in the evening. That is the time when the Joe Louis puppets come to live. Folk tales are told through the classic art of puppetry. Puppeteers dressed in black. They control the legs, arms and head of each puppet and blend into the background while the colorful and elegant puppets come to life. Puppets and puppeteers are both dance along with the music which is Thai classical music.

In the past, all four types of puppetry performances were popular in Thai society, evidenced in historical records regarding the employment of puppet performances as major entertainment on various occasions and for many royal ceremonies, e.g. royal cremation ceremonies (Pannengpetch, 1992, p. 145). Unfortunately, now the decreasing of this type of entertainment is represented. The indicator of this downward trend is shown by the practice rescinding of the Hun Luang and Hun Wang Na performances. Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has changed from a mass performance to a specialized performance in a special occasion (especially international level). Former puppets that have been used in the performance are well-organized and exhibited by the National Museum in Bangkok. At present, Joe Louis Puppet Theatre aiming to represent the people of later generations with pride of our material culture in the creation of art and also to overwhelm with intellect and skills of the ancestors.

Changes of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre in Distances.

Further observation of human beings in social situations convinced that four were sufficient; intimate, personal, social and public. Choice of terms to describe various distances was deliberate. Indicating infraculture and culture but also by a desire to provide a clue as to types of activities and relationships associated with each distance. (Edward T.Hall, 1966, p. 114).

Public Distance

Joe Louis Puppet Theatre used to have a usual public distance that is not restricted to public figures but can be used by anyone on public occasions. There are certain adjustments that have been made, however. At thirty or more feet away from the audience, the shades of meaning or what they wanted to communicate conveyed by the normal voice are lost, the same as details of the puppet's facial or body expression and movement.



(The last performance at Suan Lum Night Bazaar, Photographer: www.oknation.net)

The performance must be exaggerated or amplified by the actors (Puppeteers). The sound using in the puppet performance is completely recorded. Only when the puppets come to play with the audience, the puppeteers will use their own voice to communicate. Therefore, much of the nonverbal part of the communication on stage shifted to gestures and body stance of both puppet and puppeteers.

Social distance

At present, the performance of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre is getting more into a combination of social and personal distance. In terms of social distance, it is a very common distance for people who are attending a casual social gathering. An intimate visual detail in the face of the puppet is not perceived, and nobody between the actors (puppeteers) and the audience touches or expects to touch another person unless there is some special effort. A specialized performance has been performed in a specific space which is in the middle of the restaurant.



(Hanuman is staring at the audience, Photographer: Chalotorn Juntawong)

The puppet troupe who work together tend to use close social distance in their performance. The puppets stand and look down at a person (audience), at this distance the puppets have a domineering effect for the audience to pay more attention and to communicate with the puppets.

Personal distance

At this distance, there is more involvement between the actors (puppeteers) and the audience. The sense of closeness derives in part from the possibilities present in regard to what each the puppeteers can do to the audience with their extremities. At this distance, the puppets can hold, kiss or grasp the other person (audience or someone who is around).



(Hanuman is kissing the audience, Photographer: Chalotorn Juntawong)

Keeping someone in the puppet's arm's length is one way of expressing the phase of personal distance. It extends from a point that is just outside easy touching distance by the puppets to a point where the audience can touch, get kissed by them or hug them if they extend both arms. This is the physical domination in the very real sense

of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre. Subjects of personal interest and involvement can be discussed and occur at this distance.

Changes of identity, space and boundaries of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre

Space and place are not just words and definitions. They are material practices that are produced, consumed and reproduced in cycles of capital accumulation, social reproduction and cultural representation. Space is constructed, not simply discovered, and Places are made, not merely found. (John Rennie Short, 2000, p.107). Space and place of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre are sites of interaction between the political and economic, social and individual, cultural and personal which constitute active moments in cycles of investment and reinvestment, social interaction, cultural production and consumption.

Since Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has lost their place at Suam Lum Night Barzaar. The puppet troupe adapted themselves to the changing society in order to serve the urban people's culture by decreasing their space and boundaries more into a local performance. Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience. As agents in the world we are always "in place", much as we are always "in culture". For this reason our relations to place and culture become elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities. (J. Nicholas Entrikin, 1991, page 1). The relation to place of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has become their identity. The Theatre has to locate in a public place

which has a lot of travelers and foreigners in order to attract people. That's why one of the signatures of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre is a place for dining. The Joe Louis Puppet Theatre still maintaining their identity in their connection with the song, arts and dance through the place which is a restaurant. The Suan Lum Night Bazaar location closed in 2010 and the future for Joe Louis Puppet Theater was uncertain, but then the reinvestment of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has been made. From June 2012, they can now be found at "Asiatique the Riverfront" which is a place for shopping, entertainment and lifestyle venue located on Charoen Krung Road adjacent to Bangkok's Chao Phraya River. A new business inspired by the urban lifestyles and culture. The theatre attracts people with the combination of selling Thai food while letting the audience enjoy the performance in the same time. The puppet theatre represented in a variety of Thai artistic forms through the art of Thai food, Thai puppets and Thai songs.

Changes in economic and social interaction are directly affected the puppet troupe. A specialized performance has been formed to serve people in a special occasion. Comparing to the past, the theatre proved to be hugely popular with local people and tourists, but now their identity seems to be "Showing our nation's heritage". In the other hand, known as a symbol of "Wishes for all auspicious occasions" instead of a mass performance.

At present, some adjustment was made. The performances the theatre offered

became more modern, as their clientele are primarily tourists, and the style of the shows was adjusted so that it was more appropriate for this audience. The puppets changed in their structure, mechanism, and even attire, so as to appear more attractive (Posayakrit, 1986, p. 85) Especially in terms of the puppets, they are able to move more realistically, which became more attractive to the audience. Moreover, modern social issues and situation in Thailand such as speech from famous politician and celebrity or trendy jargon were added into the performance without diminish the greatness of original performance. This could be a chance of preserving this kind of art and preventing from fading out of Thai culture.

Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has significantly improved their performance year by year. The troupe trying to invent new act despite the standard stages and also the adaptation of backdrops that has been improved to perform at any scale of the play. The show cannot be performed through the whole story because it is too long, that is the reason why the contents of the show are scoped by separated into short episodes. The examples of the popular stories used in the Thai theatrical puppetry performances are Phra Aphai Manee, the romantic story by Sunthorn Phu Thai poet laureate and Hindu epic stories such as the Ramayana, the historical drama which originated in India such as Hanuman chasing after Nang Ramayana Suphanmatcha. These stories were separated to make it fits the right timing of the performance and also keeping attention from the audience.

The episode of ‘Nang Loi’ (The Floating Lady) begins with the story that Sida has been abducted from Phra Ram (Rama) and detained by Thotsakan, the King of Longka. As the result, Phra Ram sends his army to fight with Thotsakan to get Sida back. Thotsakan then asks his niece, Benyakai, to transform herself into Sida’s dead body. The dead body floats up the river near Phra Ram’s camp to fool him into thinking that Sida is dead so that his army will retreat to their homeland. Hanuman, the general of Phra Ram’s army, finds out that the body is not Sida but Benyakai. Benyakai then flies up into the sky to escape.

The puppets scene “Hanuman seizing Benyakai” is the separated show scene from the episode of ‘Nang Loi’, showing only when Hanuman pursues her through the heavens, catches her, and finally falls in love with her.



(Hanuman with Benyakai, Photographer: Chalotorn Juntawong)

The contents of the show were scoped to be in a smaller performance because of the smaller place (restaurant at Asiatique the Riverfront). The troupe has to

perform in the middle of the restaurant. What they can do determines how audiences experience in a given space. A room that can be traversed in four or five steps gives an entirely different experience from a room requiring fifteen or twenty steps or a room with a ceiling you can touch is quite different from one with a ceiling eleven feet high. The sense of spaciousness actually experienced depends on whether or not the puppet troupe can walk or move around. The puppets are performed in a space which is a “Round-theatre” hence, the far or the closer that audiences can get does matters to their attention.



(The puppet performance in the middle of the restaurant, Photographer: Chalotorn Juntawong)

The relations to place and urban people’s culture became elements in the construction of individual and collective identities of the puppet troupe. There is an intimate bond between Joe Louis Puppet Theatre and the environment, not really in material sense, but also the local environment provides most of the material culture. A close connection with their place is their very

survival as well as identity depended upon it. Joe Louis Puppet Theatre survival still depends on the quality of environment, but they just have to learn how to shape their identity to be attuned to the audience. Space and place are connected to each other and it represents contrasting ways of depicting the society and the environment around us through the smaller scale of the puppet troupe’s performances.

Mapping of Joe Louis Puppet Theatre.

Space perception is not only a matter of what can be perceived but what can be screen out. People brought up in different cultures learn as children, without ever knowing that they have done so, to screen out one type of information while paying close attention to another. Once set, these perceptual patterns apparently remain quite stable throughout life. (Edward T.Hall, 1966, p. 44) From the past, the puppet troupe performed widely all around the country. Mapping of people’s thought and perception at that time is that the puppet show is for children but the new mapping has changed into a show especially for adults. Moreover, Joe Louis Puppet Theatre already set up a new mapping that Thai Classical Puppet show is something rare and precious and you can find them only in a special occasion.

There is a cross-cultural borrowing and the borrowed things have to be adapted. Otherwise, the new and the old style will not match properly. The original way of watching the show is to watch in the theatre were

adapted and combined together with the way of watching the show while having meal in the same time. People are learning the way of perceptual patterns through the way the puppet troupe performed, in terms of the place, occasion, storytelling and activities while watching the show.

Conclusion

Thai Small Puppets used to be a mass performance which open to the public and performed widely all around the country as major entertainment on various occasions. Joe Louis Puppet troupe has changed their distance from public into a combination of social and personal distance. The puppet troupe adapted themselves to the changing society in order to serve the urban people's culture by decreasing their space and boundaries more into a local performance. To show national's heritage, Joe Louis Puppet Theatre has changed from a mass performance to a specialized performance in a special occasion (especially international level).

Joe Louis Puppet Theatre's adaptation could be a chance of preventing the art of Thai small puppet from fading away from

Thai society. They are maintaining their identity in their connection with the song, arts and dance through the place which is a restaurant located at Asiatique the Riverfront, Bangkok. A specialized performance and some adjustment has been made. The performances became more modern and the stories were separated into short episodes.

Suggestion

"Joe Louis" Puppet performance represents the intellect, creativity and imagination of brighter idea that trying to maintain the spirit of Thai culture and pass it to the next generation of Thai people. Concerning and protecting our nation heritage by learning and understanding the adaptation of Thai performing arts through puppets show is another way to preserve and maintain our culture identity. To understand arts properly, one has to view it many times and enter into a discourse with the artist through their work as a reproduction. The reproduction of arts can do more than remind the viewer of something he has already seen, it also reflects our society and keep up the way of cultural communication.

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