

Democratising Tradition

Scholar and dance dramaturg Nanako Nakajima speaks with Thai dance artist Pichet Klunchun about his sixteen-year research into traditional Thai khon dance. Klunchun founded the Chang Theatre for the contemporary dance community in Bangkok in 2017. With his company he tours internationally, making him one of the leading artists from Asia. He now presents “No. 60”, which powerfully showcases his intersecting of traditional khon and contemporary Euro-American dance.

In Asian countries including Thailand, questioning traditional culture is taboo. Thai traditional dance, which includes khon, is often strictly fixed by a set of formal aesthetics and rules. As the choreographer Pichet Klunchun notes: “One of the rationales behind the fixed system of traditional Thai performance aesthetics is the belief that Thai traditional dance originated from the gods. Only certain individuals have the authority to change, add or amend its aesthetics. They are the king, a senior teacher or the god of the dance, who possesses the dancer during the act of performance.”

Klunchun started studying khon dance with the renowned master Chaiyot Khummanee at age 16. In the traditional master-saying no. Students submit to their masters, as if they were their servants. In the tradition of khon dance, new choreography has been solely produced by masters. Dancers are expected to copy the choreography without coming up with their own ideas. This age- and experience-based, spiritual hierarchy guides the unconscious, non-verbal level of one’s dancing body, and dictates group dynamics in ways that are focused on passing down expertise; however, it also freezes the student’s creative imagination.

In Klunchun’s company, by contrast, some of the choreographic compositions come from his dancers, who are encouraged to execute their own ideas. During a conversation with the dramaturg Lim How Ngean, Klunchun explained that he confronted the younger members not as his students but as his dancers. He found a new way of constructing the body by learning from them. This process brings his company to a different level from the traditional structure of khon. In a discussion with the producer and dramaturg of “No. 60”, Tang Fu Kuen, Klunchun explained the process of modernisation in Thailand along with khon dance: “In 1932 Thailand changed its political system from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. That was a big step towards democracy. The concept of Thainess started during the period after 1932. The College of Dramatic Arts was founded, and khon became recognised as a national dance. When you consider the historical timeline at that moment, you understand the government started to form a direction and change Thailand into a united, modernised

country, along with the concept of Thainess and the performance of khon.”

In order to constitute a national identity, khon dance was used as propaganda. Khon dance presents stories of Ramakian, a Thai version of the Sanskrit epic Ramayana, which depicts the glory of King Rama, the hero and incarnation of the god Vishnu. In Thailand the Chakri dynasty founded by Rama the First in 1782 adopted the name of king, and it still prevails in the current monarchy. Khon dance was the main dance in Bangkok; all the other dance forms belonged to the khon form. However, Klunchun realised that khon was not the main tenet of the dance vocabulary, and started looking for the original movement, asking where the first movement came from, from the south or the north of Thailand. In order to emancipate himself from khon’s strict disciplined forms and its hierarchy within traditional culture, Klunchun further engaged with shamanism and the notion of possession.

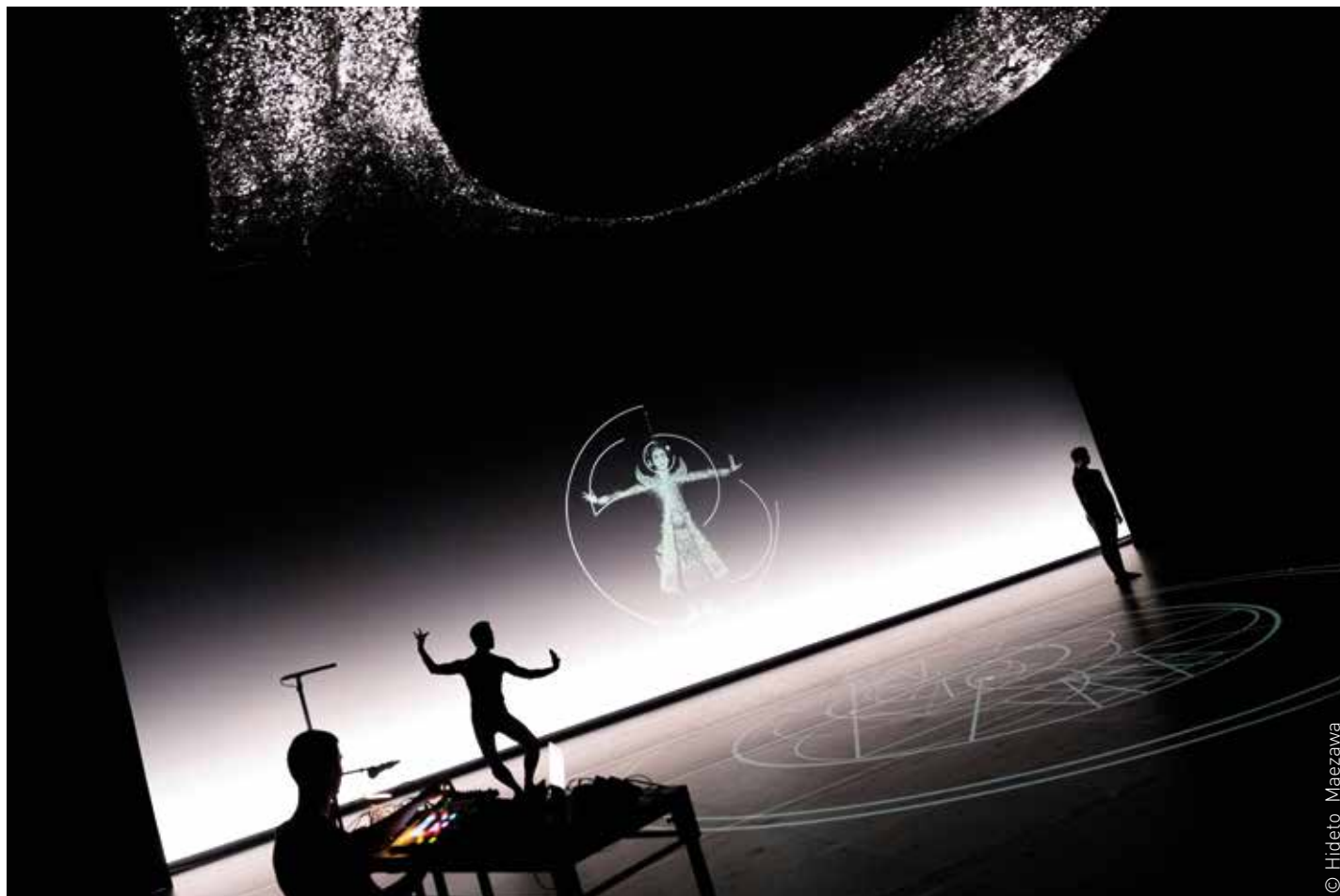
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“In the northeast of Thailand, in the province called Dan Sai, they have a dance festival for the dead, called Phi Ta Khon Festival. There is a community of shamans who engage in 24-hour-long continuous dancing and moving. I researched this for two years. The first year as an observer and the second year, I had questions about the freedom of the mind and the freedom of movement. How can people continue the movements and maintain their energy, and transform themselves into another person and keep dancing for hours on end? In the performance of khon you work with the gods or with characters. But in Dan Sai they deal with nature and family spirits. This enters into another kind of spirituality.”

In order to share this dance knowledge with ordinary people, Klunchun seeks to democratise the traditional form of khon dance. The secret transmission of this knowledge in a hierarchical system enforces the tradition and excludes outsiders. The traditional dance also needs years of professional training. The idea of “No. 60” is to deconstruct the movements of khon and create a new basic vocabulary for all people to use. As Klunchun says: “‘No. 60’ is the search for principals and methods to develop the language, meaning and techniques of a new dance form from the wisdom of the traditional dance form. It is a way to connect with the traditional dance form and retain its value while creating a new knowledge that fits within the present. And people can create their own choreography from their personalities and free themselves with a new form of dance.” This “No. 60” principle is an important tool in helping artists to find their dance identity, which originates in their traditional roots. Such a critical toolbox enables every ordinary dancer the liberty of thought and body to create their own individual movements.

Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun’s
fresh take on khon dance

Interview: Nanako Nakajima



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Klunchun travelled to the US, where he became influenced by William Forsythe. While traditional dancers practice their forms without creative thinking, Forsythe encourages his dancers to think for themselves. Klunchun attempts to democratise khon dance with a detailed analysis of the traditional Thai dance practice of the Theppanom canon. This is the structural continuity that connects a series of basic patterns in terms of dynamics, weight, direction, energy and inside/outside structure, which all Thai classical dancers acquire by rote-learning. It consists of 59 core poses and movements. In “No. 60” the effort and spiritual system of the canon is notated and deconstructed in drawings, hereby offering a deepened analysis of the traditional dance form. It is also reminiscent of Rudolf von Laban’s movement analysis, which inspired Forsythe to develop his Improvisation Technologies. To analyse and notate dance is to demystify dance, which eventually democratises dance. The deeper you go the higher you jump. Klunchun’s journey toward “No. 60” is very much based on this very detailed analysis of his traditions, which he has continuously updated over the last 16 years.

The drastic change in recent Thai politics further motivated Klunchun’s practice. If the political landscape would not have changed dramatically in Thailand, Klunchun would not have come up with this profound understanding of freedom: the emancipation of individuals along with one’s own improvised gesture. In the truest sense, freedom appears as a form of emancipation. Driven by electronic live music composed by Zai Tang, Pichet Klunchun and the dancer Kornkarn Rungsawang take us on an exuberant journey that hails the dancing body as emancipated from ideological impositions. This is a hyper-corporeal journey that stems from ancient traditions and moves through to the global present. Klunchun’s message rings loud and clear: we need to be free wherever we are, whenever we are. 📢

Pichet Klunchun
No. 60

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