



**Pradit Prasartthong**

Director and actor of the theater company Makhampom and secretary general of Bangkok Theatre Network

**Bangkok Theatre Network and Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space joint productions  
*Akaoni and Nogyo Shojo***

Date: Nov. 19 – 23, 2009  
Venue: Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space Mini Theatre 1, 2  
<http://www.geigeki.jp/english/index.html>

**The current status of Thai theater (source: Japan Foundation "Arts and Cultural Exchange Basic Information")**

<http://www.jpf.go.jp/j/about/survey/basic/thai/2-2-1.html>

**Traditional Dance**

Traditional Thai dance is taught intensively at the Royal Academy of Dance and in the Traditional Dance Dept. of the national university. Primary school children also learn traditional dance and music as part of their classroom studies and many citizens acquire aspects of these arts. Although the traditional dances and music are often performed at tourist spots (restaurants, etc.), there are actually few opportunities to see formal, quality performances of these arts.

The popular likay comedy theater is an art form that is often performed at festivals or temple rituals and events, but full-fledged Khon mask theater performances are only given a few times a year. The likay style slapstick comedy is continues to be popular in contemporized forms performed regularly on TV variety shows. The more than 100 year-old puppet theater form called Hun Lakhon Lek is now performed regularly through the cooperation of the Joe Louis Theatre in Lumpini Night Bazaar. The famous shadow puppet plays of southern Thailand called Nang Yai come in many versions and many theater troupes perform them in inventive styles to carry on this tradition.

**Contemporary theater**

In the field of commercial theater, musicals starring the top stars are popular in recent

Nov. 11 2009

# Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

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In addition to the active role of traditional dance and commercial theater starring popular actors in Thai society, the activities of small theater companies also play an important part of the country's cultural life despite their limited numbers. One leader among these companies is Pradit Prasartthong, the representative, director and actor of the theater company Makhampom, a company actively involved in community-based programs. In this interview he talks about the activities of Makhampom and about the Bangkok Theatre Network he helped found in 1997 at the occasion of a Thai-language production of Hideki Noda's *Akaoni* (Red Demon) resulting from a workshop in Thailand by the playwright Noda.

(Interviewer: Miho Sentoku; interview: Oct. 9, 2009 in Bangkok)

May we begin by asking you to give us a self-introduction and telling us how you became involved in theater?

My name is Pradit Prasartthong (laughs). As a child, my mother often took me to see the traditional Thai "Khon" mask dance theater. That inspired a love of traditional Thai arts in me and made me decide to go to study all the traditional forms of Thai music and theater besides Khon when I went to Suan Kularb High School.

I went to Thammasat University (a university known as a center of the student democracy movement in the 1970s) and was active in the theater club while majoring in anthropology in the Sociology Department. That was a period of political turmoil during the late 1970s into the '80s and political theater called Lakorn Karnmuang was very active. The civilian government established after the student rebellion of 1973 proved short-lived, and this was a time when it was replaced by military rule again after a military coup d'état. It was at that time that I met the politician, literati and thespian Kukrit Pramoj (1911-95; representative intellectual, Prime Minister from 1975-76, recipient of Special Prize of the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize).

The reason I am able to act the roles of the prince and the monkey in Khon drama is because Mr. Pramoj had me do the monkey role. In Khon theater the roles of the prince, the monkey and the demon are usually given to different actors based mostly on their physical attributes. Under the conventional actor training system, once that role is given, the actor trains intensely in the conventions of that one particular role and never performs either of the other roles, but Mr. Pramoj was a teacher who watched the character of his students carefully and assigned them different roles according to their actual talents. That is why I was able to try the monkey role as well.

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years. As for small-theater type art theater, the audience apparently remains limited. The number of theaters is also limited, which leads many of the small companies to find and innovate venues like spaces in restaurants or rooms in buildings for each production and there are very few companies that continue performances of their repertoire on a regular basis.

Among the companies that have their own theater space are the Patravadi Theatre and the Moradok Mai Theater (seating capacity: approx. 80). Other companies include the physical theater-oriented B-Floor and the company 8 × 8 that presents urban theater led by playwright Nikorn Saetang. The company Crescent Moon formerly led by Pipit Nimit Kun is somewhat less active since he left the company.

There are also companies like Makhampom and Maya Box that receive support from educational institutions and international organizations and actively conduct contemporary theater workshops in regional schools and communities. Furthermore, the drama departments of the various universities also host performances actively on a regular basis. In particular, the performances by the theater departments of Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University and Bangkok University attract large audiences and are written up in newspaper reviews.

His influence is surely the reason why I continue to break the rules of traditional Thai music performance and Khon directing today.

Would you tell us in a bit more detail about the relationship between theater and the political realities of Thailand during the 1970s?

With the student rebellion of 1973, the military regime saw the power of the students, and that led them to tighten their control over the people and the students. There were cases where farmers who opposed the military government's policies were abducted and kill. Amidst these dire conditions, we thought that rather than just talking with people about the problems, the most effective method could be to make them the subject of theater. That is why I wrote plays and held performances of them. I was very much afraid as I did it, because I knew there was the danger that I would be arrested by the police or attacked those who opposed us, but it was also very fulfilling to be active in that way.

It was at that time that I began participating in the activities of the theater company Makhampom as a volunteer. I was very much moved by the plays the Makhampom company performed and decided to join the company when I graduated from university. Presently I serve as the company's administrative director, artistic director and program director.

Please tell us about the activities Makhampom is engaged in.

Makhampom is a group with a strong concern for political issues. It has always been a company that did plays reflecting the voices of the common people, especially the weaker members of the society and the people from the provinces, and from the time I joined the company it was already involved in community programs. That community involvement was particularly strong in the area education. Today, Makhampom is involved in activities in four main areas.

The first is our Community Theater Projects, in which we do performances at the grassroots level with the aim of educating the people with regard to various issues. These projects are conducted in the provinces as well as the urban centers.

The second is our Theater Education Projects that target teachers and students at the grassroots level with theater as the medium of communication. These activities are also held outside the schools.

The third is our Performance Projects, for which I am personally responsible. These are activities that seek to promote communication within the society and communities through the medium of theater.

The fourth is our International Projects. Here we work to strengthen international exchanges with theater people around the world. The events are held in Thailand but the participation of foreign directors and actors in the performances and workshops enables various international exchange.

What is the organizational structure of Makhampom like?

Makhampom was established in 1980 and in 2005 it was granted status as a foundation. We have five people on our administrative committee, 10 directors and for each project we have staff ranging from 20 to 30 people. The five members of the administrative committee have regular salaries but the project director and staff are paid on a piecework basis. There are also unpaid volunteers working for us.

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Would you tell us about the projects the company now has in progress?

There are so many, it makes me tired just thinking about them all (laughs). For example we have the production of *Akaoni* that we are preparing to take to Japan for performances. This work is being created under the theme of the “Art of Peace.” We hope that through this work we can make some contribution to easing the ethnic strife currently afflicting the southern region of our country. In it we use music from three of the southern provinces, Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. The play’s underlying subject of discrimination toward the “akaoni” as a being that is different can be associated in a way with the current conflicts between the Muslim and Buddhist groups in the south.

In another project we are working with refugees from Myanmar. We also have a project dealing with the problem of domestic violence through theater, with workshops and performances.

In the Myanmar refugee project do you just present plays, or do you have the refugees involved in acting roles in the plays?

Yes. We have the Myanmar refugees perform the plays themselves, and in the domestic violence project we have victims of this violence perform in the plays while searching for answers to the questions of why people can’t find happiness within the family environment and why the fathers turn to violence. By having these people playing the roles and working together with us in creating the plays provided opportunities for direct and meaningful discussion and for us to hear their first-hand experiences with domestic violence. Then I gather these stories and work them together into a play scenario for performance.

Why do you prefer to have them actually become actors in these plays rather than just having them watch plays?

Having them perform in the plays is similar to interviewing them. Rather than interviewing them verbally, however, we interview them through action. Also by actually acting out the parts themselves, they learn what kinds of actions communicate their message to a third person. Through the discussions and consultations that occur during the creative process for a play, they come to understand what cooperation means and what understanding the other person involves. Through these plays, the people involved are able to get the public to understand them and listen to what they have to say. In the end, they also gain confidence and pride in themselves. It also helps release stress that has built up within them. Through theater they look more deeply into themselves and in the process they can learn a variety of things.

During the creative process, we come in and lend our hand in making the their stories into more artistic theatrical works. From their standpoint, seeing their life stories take the form of impressive dramas becomes another source of confidence in themselves. Meanwhile, from the standpoint of the audience, it becomes an opportunity to learn about and understand these people.

I would like to ask you about the 1997 Thai version of *Akaoni*. This production was the first to be developed under the Japan Foundation’s Asian Performing Arts Exchange and Research Program, which was initiated with the purpose of bringing together Asian and Japanese theater people to create joint productions. The production was

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### *Akaoni*

This work premiered in 1996 as a NODA MAP production. The following year the Japan Foundation's Asian Performing Arts Exchange and Research Program was launched with the purpose of bringing together Asian and Japanese theater people to create joint productions. In 1997, as the first project of this program (organized in cooperation with the Setagaya Public Theatre), Hideki Noda held a workshop with Thai actors from Bangkok and to create and perform a Thai version of *Akaoni*. After that this Thai version was performed in Bangkok in 1998 and reproduced in Tokyo in 1999. In 2003 an English version performed by British actors and staff was presented. In 2004 the Japanese, English and Thai versions were presented in successive performances in Tokyo, winning that year's Asahi Performing Arts Awards Grand Prix.

[Story]

A strange person arrives on the shore in a boat and is mistaken for a cannibal "Akaoni" by the people of the village. It is discriminated against and eventually sentenced to be executed. But a trio consisting of "The Woman," her dimwit brother Tombi and the liar Mizukane learn that the Akaoni doesn't eat humans but only eats flowers and came to their shore in search of a utopia. Then they try to save Akaoni ....

the product of workshops held with Hideki Noda and Thai actors and was performed at the Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo, which some consider a landmark event for contemporary Thai theater. You were one of the actors who performed in that *Akaoni* production. Can you tell us what it was like working with Hideki Noda?

When I met Mr. Noda, my first impression was that of a somewhat distant person who was difficult to approach. As I actually got to know him I found that this was not true at all, but that was a natural first impression because, from the standpoint of Thai actors like myself, we looked at Mr. Noda as a very important director in the theater world. In general, for Thai actors, the director is a person of authority and we tend to treat them with an excessive amount of deference and even fear. And it was the same with Mr. Noda at first. However, I saw it as a great opportunity to work with someone like him, so I applied for the project. I ended up working with him through two full days of workshops, and during that amount of time you get a pretty good idea of the other person's character. It was an opportunity to learn a lot from Mr. Noda, and for example, even if I were not chosen it would have been a chance to begin a lasting relationship. It was not just a case of being chosen through an audition. Watching Mr. Noda do the workshop was an experience that convinced me that he and I are people who think in very similar ways.

As the word "play" implies, Thai actors never forget to enjoy themselves in their work, even though working on a production is a job. We believe that a performance is something that we should enjoy acting in, and we don't like to look at productions simply as jobs that must be done. At first, we were disturbed by the fact that the Japanese staff couldn't comprehend this attitude of ours. When the Japanese do a play, they work seriously in rehearsals and are very disciplined about being on time and obeying the rules of conduct. But that is not the case with Thai actors. Often we aren't on time and we haven't learned our lines completely. We always approach a play with a spirit of fun. And sometimes we play around too much, which can be a problem, too (laughs).

However, because Mr. Noda is a very intelligent person, he watched how we worked and tried to understand us and our approach. One of the first things he asked me was what is the biggest problem I have when working with Thai actors. I answered that it is their lack of responsibility regarding their work. We also tend not to think well of people who let themselves get too serious about their work. That is something that foreigners have to understand when working with Thai people.

That might be the reason why Mr. Noda would play some game with us Thai actors, football or basketball or some traditional Japanese game, before we began each workshop. I was very much impressed by that kind of understanding Mr. Noda had about how to have real exchange with people.

Have you worked with directors from other countries?

Yes. I have worked with directors of the West and have found that differences of opinion occur rather often. For example, there are aesthetic differences concerning the arts. I have found that Germans tend to be very strict about abiding by rules and once a script is written they never seem to have the flexibility to change it. I feel that the arts are different from science. Art is a matter of the actor's feelings at any given moment, and the weather and the environment, so many elements are involved and that leaves the possibility for infinite changes and variables. As for American direc-

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tors, my experience is that they are too concerned with technology and frameworks. On the other hand, they tend to place less importance on the contents of the script. I personally place importance on physical expression through body movement, and that sometimes causes conflict of opinions. As for Japanese theater people, I feel that their tendency is to want to reach a high level of perfection in a work.

In contrast, Thai actors and directors, as is probably true with most Asian theater, we prefer exaggerated acting on stage. This is because the audience feels that exaggerated acting is more real and they find it more appealing. And because of this common way of thinking, I have always enjoyed working with people of places like Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. I feel a special affinity when working with people of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. When we did a joint production with people from Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, everyone was talking in their own language, without using any English at all. Of course, we had interpreters when necessary but I found that to an amazing degree there are words that we can all understand despite our ethnic differences.

Could you tell us about Bangkok Theatre Network (hereafter BTN) in some more detail? We have heard that before *Akaoni* there was little interaction between Thai theater people who belonged to different theater companies.

That's correct. By nature, Thai actors are rather egotistical and their pride doesn't let them interact with other actors of companies much. And, because the companies perform one or two works a year, the audience isn't very large either. In conditions like that it isn't really possible to spread contemporary theater to the general Thai public. So I thought that each company should not only do their own productions but also interact more and try to create an environment where we could all bring performances to the public with greater frequency. In about 1992 there was a call to start a network between the companies, but the effort failed. Then we tried again and again it was unsuccessful. *Akaoni* brought a third chance. The Japan tour brought everyone together around Mr. Noda, and it was like a party every night. We spent all the days and nights together. In that environment where it was not just work but personal interaction as well, there was meaningful exchange and finally everyone agreed that we should start a network, and that was BTN.

There is one more factor behind the founding of our network that I have to mention. That is the presence of the director of the Japan Foundation's Japan Culture Center in Bangkok at the time, Mr. Junetsu Komatsu (present standing director of the Shibuzawa Ei'ichi Memorial Foundation). Mr. Komatsu had a greater interest in Thai theater than most Thais, and he would often call me when he needed information about some aspect of Thai theater. For that reason I would also call other theater companies often in order to gather information. In the process I was able to establish relationships of mutual trust with the other companies. And I believe that we would not have been successful in establishing our network had it not been for those relationships of trust.

BTN was initially launched with 10 member companies, including Makhampom. At one point we were up to 12 companies, but now we are back to 10. That is partly because we have a policy of removing companies that are not sufficiently active from our list of members. Our network was organized in 2002, but we aren't officially incorporated as a [non-profit] organization yet. In the future I hope to see us become

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officially registered as a foundation. We also have individual members including about 30 theater professors and instructors from ten universities, and about 50 members of the press and journalists. There is no membership fee for these people, but we do have the members cooperate in publicity, seminars and the like. We also have universities that give their students credits for working on our festivals or as volunteer staff for BTN.

BTN is funded by membership fees and special members (operating committee members) pay 2,400 baht a year (approx. 72 USD) while general members pay 1,200 baht (approx. 36 USD). Since these membership fees are so inexpensive, we cannot operate on these fees alone and we can't keep any permanent staff. For office space, we use one area of a friend's office. However, as we have continued to make significant achievements, starting this year we are receiving support from a government-related organization as the Bangkok Theatre Network Project.

### What is the aim of BTN?

The most important aim is to strengthen the position of Thai theater people and the theater world. In order to achieve that aim, we get people from the theater audience, the mass media, artists, critics, educators and other people from a variety of fields to become involved in BTN as central members.

### What are the main activities BTN is involved in at the moment?

Our central program aimed at raising society's awareness of theater is the Bangkok Theatre Festival since 2002 that involves about 30 theater companies.

In addition to this, we conduct seminars about the running of theater companies and performances and acting and theater workshops. At times we also organize collaborative productions between different theater companies and their performances. One example is the Tokyo performances of the play *Nogyo Shojo* (Girl of the Soil), which is not only a joint production of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space and BTN but also a collaboration between Thai actors from different companies.

### I would like to ask you about the joint production work between BTN and Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space. How did this collaboration come about?

I received an invitation from the assistant director of Tokyo Arts Theatre, Hiroshi Takahagi, to direct one of Hideki Noda's plays. At that time I thought of not directing it myself but making this an opportunity for some talented Thai director, so I consulted BTN and we invited Mr. Noda to Bangkok and held a workshop. After this workshop there were seven directors who said they wanted to direct the production. Among them there were three directors that I thought would do something interesting with a Noda play. They were Nut Nualpang, Nikorn Saetang and Damkerng Thitapiyasak. Nut has an especially good knowledge of Noda's works. Nikorn has outstanding directing talent, and Damkerng is excellent at adapting foreign plays and staging them in a very Thai theatrical manner. All of them are also excellent actors as well as directors. It was decided that Nut would be director, but Nikorn and Damkerng also were given roles as actors. The actors were chosen by us in a workshop organized by BTN. To choose the work to be produced we had the plots of seven Noda works translated and from them we chose *Nogyo Shojo*. We felt it was the work that had the most in common with the Thai life.

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Bangkok Theatre Festival 2008



*Nogyo Shojo* is a contemporary style play, but when you directed the Makhampom company version of *Akaoni* you did it in the style of Thailand's traditional popular comedy theater, "likay." Why did you choose to do it in the likay style?

Likay is an art form that has developed along with Thai society. It is one of the few arts that has maintained traditional aspects but also kept relevance to contemporary life so it doesn't become outdated. When Mr. Takahagi made me the offer of directing a Noda play, I immediately thought that if I were to direct it myself I would do it in the likay style.

Likay is originally a Malay art form, which means it emerged from Islamic culture. Therefore, I thought to set the play in southern Thailand where many people of Malay descent live. And yes, since it was to be a special commemorative project for the Japan-Mekong Exchange Year, I also thought to set it in a village on the Mekong River, but if that were the case, the bottle that is set afloat could never come back like it does in the original story. (laughs) So, I thought that it should be set in a seaside village in southern Thailand and use music that sounds exotic to the Thai ear.

Both *Akaoni* and *Nogyo Shojo* will be on the program for your Bangkok Theatre Festival this time.

They will be one of the highlights of the festival. Because we had the intention of promoting exchange between the theater people themselves in our festival, we had concentrated performances in theater spaces in the Banglumphu area until about two or three years ago. But recently we have been mounting performances in other districts too, and this time *Akaoni* will be performed at the Jim Thompson House in Bangkok and *Nogyo Shojo* will be at the Thailand Culture Centre.

Could you tell us about the Bangkok Theatre Festival in a bit more detail?

The festival was launched in 2002 as the Bangkok Theatre Season and the name was changed the following year to Bangkok Theatre Festival. Today, the festival's main sponsors are the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, Thailand's Ministry of Culture and the municipality of Bangkok. They provide us not only with funding but also performances venues and assistance in publicity.

This year's is the festival's 8th holding and the scope of activities has grown considerably. Presently there are three or four BTN member companies that run their own small theater spaces and we use these small spaces as much as possible for the festival too. This is because we want this festival to be an opportunity for the public to see our companies' productions and activities. This year about 50 works will be performed in these smaller spaces. And when you consider that last year the festival had a total of 110 works on the program, you will see that 50 works is not necessarily a large number for us. Festival participants pay a space use fee of 500 baht (approx. 15USD) for an outdoor venue, 1,000 baht (approx. 30USD) for a theater performance, 1,500 baht (approx. 45USD) for a special venue. Also the rule is that 10% of the ticket sales for each performance on the festival program is donated to BTN.

What do you think the major issues are for the small-theater scene in Thailand?

The biggest issue is the lack of paid professional artists. The actors of Makhampom are paid and work in the studio full-time, but most of the actors in the other companies have a day job that they earn a living at and then come to the studio to rehearse with

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the other company members only at night after work, so they all get tired. However, with *Akaoni* this time it is a likay version that requires people with special skills in the acting and song, dance, music and technical staff, and these people can only come to the company part-time. So this has also become a case where the rehearsals are being done after work in the evenings.

The other big issue is ongoing funding support from the government. Our hope is to convince people of the importance of maintaining our theaters and get the kind of ongoing financial support that requires. We have talked with the current government and it is mostly decided that we will be getting support from next year for a minimum of three years. If this support continues, things like drama contests will become possible and that should be an effective stimulus for the development of the Thai theater world. Of course we also need funds to increase the number of performances and to spend on the production of quality works, but most immediate is the need to maintain the theaters and companies.

The Thai government has shown a lot of interest in *Nogyo Shojo*. Because this project has clearly shown that the Japanese are interested in contemporary Thai theater. It is proof that Thai theater, and even contemporary theater, can have value as productions and can be exported to foreign countries. We were able to put actual numbers on the amount of income that exporting five productions a year would bring, and showing those numbers to government officials convinced them of the value. And we also pointed out to them that in spite of the fact that Thailand also has many commercial productions performed at larger theaters that are popular, none of those productions are being exported.

In the future we want to take *Akaoni* and *Nogyo Shojo* to other foreign audiences besides just Japan. For March of 2010 there is a plan to hold a theater festival organized by the Ministry of Culture that will gather works with the potential we being exported to other countries. I plan to select and introduce from five to ten Thai productions that have been performed overseas in the past few years. I believe that doing this will create interest in Thai theater among the population and foster better understanding of it. Twelve years ago *Akaoni* had a big influence of the Thai theater world, and now this year *Akaoni* and *Nogyo Shojo* will inspire the Thai theater world in new ways.

**As the final question, I would like to ask you what your dream is.**

I have done so much work until now that I could die tomorrow with no regrets (laughs). A person who has continued to give me warm support over the past ten years, a Mr. Polat, recently said to me, "Mr. Pradit, look at the children of the Banglumphu district (where the Bangkok Theater Festival is held). Those children have grown up surrounded by theater, and now they have come to the point where they are creating plays of their own. You have played a very important role in this. Don't you feel proud of what you have done?" A festival that didn't exist ten years ago is now providing dreams for the children of Thailand.

The Bangkok Theatre Festival now has a program for presenting plays created by children, and now there are children whose dream is being able to perform their works in the festival, because it means that they have been accepted as actors or directors. The festival has also come to serve as an arts market where interesting works from the festival program can be shown to prospective presenters from at

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home and abroad.

My dream today is that in the future we can create more theaters in Thailand, actors will have a place of their own and the government will establish a foundation to support those who are active in the theater world so that they can make their living as theater people.

When I was applying for a visa to go to Japan in 1998 for *Akaoni*, I was uncertain what to write in the “occupation” space of the application form. The coordinator from Japan who was with me at that moment said, “Write artist.” I will never forget how happy it made me to write “artist” with pride as my occupation that day. I want to continue to work so that, not commercial theater, but the kind of artistic theater that shapes people’s souls will win praise from Thai society and be widely accepted.

Thank you very much for your time and informative words.

And I thank you.