

## ភាសាអង់គ្លេស

### **“The Exception and the Rule” by Bertolt Brecht**

It was quite an ingenious way of introducing Brecht to the Thai public. The original play, translated into Thai, was accompanied, scene by scene, by a semi-improvised “Thai version” depicting life from the contemporary Thai society. The performing troupe, consisting entirely of amateurs, was probably endowed with the kind of intellectual and interpretative power unknown to any “professional” group dear to television audience. The performers also had one marked advantage over their professional counterparts: they went through a series of thorough rehearsals, and at the same time, they were quite adept in improvisations which were the hallmark of the “Thai scenes”. That they

really knew what Brecht was about and what they themselves wanted to convey through the “Thai scenes” was beyond question. If they had erred in any one direction at all, it was because they tended to emphasize, and at times, over-emphasize the Brechtian sympathy for the underdogs. That they were pre-occupied with the social and political import of the play was a matter of course, and the “Thai scenes” probably spoke louder than the original. The didactic elements came off fairly well, although probably not as forcefully as the performers and producer themselves might have wished. In the hands of these excellent players, the audience was so captivated by a histrionic “tour de force” that the “message”, more

often than not, was submerged by an aesthetic pleasure of the kind hitherto unknown to Thai audiences.

Having played to full houses at the Bhirasri Museum of Modern Art in Bangkok, "The Exception and the Rule" went up to Chiangmai University and came to the Nakorn Pathom Campus of Silpakorn University in July 1976. In the opinion of the present reviewer, the Nakorn Pathom performance, although marred by an inadequate musical accompaniment, was characterized by a freshness and intimacy that was a little lacking in the Bangkok performance. The atmosphere of the lecture-hall at Nakorn Pathom probably contributed towards this spontaneous homeliness: there were no chairs in the auditorium, and the audience, both students and lecturers, sat on the floor through the three-hour performance. Other contributory factors should also be noted. Apart from a borrowed van provided by the German Cultural

Institute, there was absolutely no sign of an organized theatrical group. Actors came on the regular Bangkok—Nakorn Pathom bus-service, and after the performance, some spent the night in student hostels, while others enjoyed the hospitality of staff housing. Reports were received on the ensuing discussions between actors and spectators that went on deep into the night: it was said that they exchanged very lively views on the real import of the play and the selfimposed "mission" of the performing group which called itself "Theatre for Education". The following morning the actors departed early, again on the regular bus-service, some of them hurrying back to their respective Universities in time for the morning lectures. The dynamic performance, the sense of belonging to a "community" where actors and audience were one, all these factors accounted for the astounding success that would long be remembered. The "conviviality" known to the

Elizabethan theatre and eternalized in the "Romantic" theory of the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century German critic, Wilhelm Schlegel was there. It was a kind of theatrical life that would have been the envy of Wilhelm Meister!

The "academic" community at Nakorn Pathom responded enthusiastically to this dramatic experience. A discussion was held at a staff meeting of the Faculty of Arts on August 6, 1976, where three lecturers were invited to give their views on the play and the performance in a panel discussion. The panel consisted of one sociologist, one specialist in literature and one specialist in dramatic arts, each speaking primarily from the point of view of his/her own discipline.

The sociologist's presentation was directed first and foremost towards Brecht's dialectical thinking. The element of social inequality leading to a social conflict was highlighted. She also saw a Darwinian theory at play,

whereby physical inequality re-inforced the conflict caused by social inequality. The "remedial" measures as embodied in both the original and the Thai versions were seen to be implicit rather than explicit, and although the play might have derived its relevance from the left-right polarity prevalent in Thai society at that time, she admitted a fair degree of objectivity in the play and saw nothing that was overtly subversive.

The "literary" interpretation was given by a Lecturer in French. She saw the play—both the original and the Thai version—as a testament of human suffering. The sombre side of the contemporary society, as exemplified in the Thai version by scenes from the life in the factories, was, according to her, convincingly presented. She was impressed by the unsophisticated simplicity of the play, the use of popular every-day language to good effect and the ingenious adoption of certain

traditional characters drawn from the popular Thai theatre. Philosophically and socially speaking, the play was an eye-opener for many who were fortunate enough to have seen it.

The most enthusiastic reception came naturally from the Lecturer in Dramatic Arts who was particularly impressed by the many theatrical possibilities opened up by this novel dramatic experience. He was captivated by the use of "alienating" effect and conceded that the didactic purpose of the play could thus be achieved. The "Thai scenes" were felt to be a natural outgrowth of the Brechtian scenes, and no incompatibility was detected. He even went so far as to conclude that if the Thai scenes were only strung together it would make a good unified stage-play in and by itself. He raised, however, certain doubts as to whether the play would have had the same degree of appeal, if presented to a different public, a more "general" public not consisting

almost exclusively of students and "intellectuals" as had been the case with the Bangkok, Chiengmai and Nakorn Pathom performances.

After the presentation by the three man panel, there followed a general discussion among the staff of the Faculty of Arts. Most speakers and discussants were of the same opinion that the play was a theatrical novelty and that this novelty could be regarded as a seed of further dramatic innovations and theatrical growth. The social and political message, however, was generally felt to be a little one-sided, although it was conceded that the depicting of human suffering was convincingly done. The comic reliefs were also felt to be properly in place. What impressed most of the discussants was the quality of acting which was described as superlative. Some members of the staff were, on the other hand, somewhat disturbed by the all too simplistic interventions of the commentators, represented in the Thai

ver concludsion by three clowns. The remark that the Thai version was based on "realities" established through "field research", i.e. the actors having spent nights and days in factories for the purpose of "data collection", was rather naive. A question was raised as to wheter the producer and actors really grasped the meaning of "verisimilitude" as against "reality." That was the price to be paid for being "didactic". All in all, it was agree that the theatrical life in Thailand could be tremendously enhanced and enriched by the performance of such a serious play, and that this could serve as an antidote against the all too facile entertainment provided by Thai movies and television.

The performing troupe was invited back two months later to Nakorn Pathom where they gave the

audience another treat with a comic vaudeville. There were plans to stage some other serious plays. It could well be stated that Brecht had already found a foothold in Thailand with just this one early work, although it must be admitted that his political message did not quite catch on. But the theatrical novelty did find a positive response. So much the better for Brecht!

The event that took place in Thailand in October 1976 has, of necessity, put a halt to such dramatic adventurism whose political implications could not easily be denied. No one can predict as to when and how a Brechtian "renaissance" in Thailand could come about.

"The rest is silence" That is the motto of the day!

**Chetana Nagavajara.**