



Relevance of small-size theatre companies in Bangkok in the current era: In spite of difficulties to survive economically, they play a vital role in culture and civilization

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Abstract

This research article on the relevance of small-size theatre companies in Bangkok in the current era aimed to study the reason why they began and exist, despite the fact that they have encountered economic difficulties. The study uses the Talcott Parsons's Structural-Functional theory and the conceptual management of art organizations as a framework for the study. This research is a qualitative research which used a phenomenological approach by using the semi-structured in-depth interview with the directors and producers of seven small-sized theatre companies in Bangkok by the criteria of size, age, and continuity. The results of the research showed that all the objectives of the existence are not for economic reasons, but have an ideological dimension, with the concept of the performing arts as a medium for expressing opinions, attitudes, critiques of society and politics for development by using the social context and relevant issues as resources. Moreover, they provide independent voices and critical perspectives on the neglected aspects of contemporary Thai society. The theatre can be a means of communication in taboo matters, such as politics and government. Most of the small theatre companies existed for ideological battles and political communication and 4 of the 7 theatre groups clearly presented political issues. Therefore, studying the work of a small theatre group in Bangkok could be another way to see reality, other aspects of society, politics, culture and civilization that cannot be seen in other forms of mainstream media.

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Introduction

Drama in Thailand has a long history. It is both a form of art and culture that reflects social conditions, ideas,

beliefs, attitudes, and the values of the creators and the audience. Drama has been used as a tool for communication and has had important functions, which have varied throughout history. Puchadapirom (2007, pp. 7–16) claimed that:

"Before the Rattanakosin period, the entertainment culture of the royal court and the upper classes was responsible for religious beliefs, which were a means of

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separating the monarch's high status from the general public and aims for entertainment. At the same time, the entertainment culture of the people is associated with the rituals and for fun, as well with different forms of entertainment."

During the overlapping period from 1950–1972, Thailand was governed by a military government. The new generation of intellectuals with opinions on politics and society gathered to write and perform political plays.

"In the years 1971–1973, the dramas of the new generation focused on the pursuit of life and were developed into community dramas. There were student drama groups who presented literary dramas about liberal thinking, human rights, equal governance and encouraged the political awareness of the audience as a tool for the new generation to resist dictatorship. In political gatherings, theatrical satire and the presentation of ideas about equality became part of the on-stage activities in student gatherings by people in opposition to dictatorship at Thammasat University on October 14, 1973." (Damrhung, 2007, p. 33)

On the 6th of October 1976, the drama against state power became an important issue following the government's use of force to suppress the opposing students. Damrhung (2007, p. 33) stated that:

"Political activities were significantly slower and caused students and those who had conflict with the government at that time to flee to the forest. Although the volunteer drama activities related to politics disappeared; it sparked another form of volunteer drama for youth and social drama groups performing in rural areas such as Makhampom Theatre Company and the Maya Theatre Company, for example."

In addition, during the years from 1977–1997, there were many positive events in the theatre industry, such as attempts to develop a professional theatre company. However, the presentation of theatrical plays was a high-cost production including management limitations to be maintained, thus, there were many drama groups that encountered problems, for example, the Montien Thong Theatre, whose management problems forced it to close down.

"In the year 1997–1998 after the economic crisis, the drama groups formed again. There were theatre companies that created works with clear story ideas that they wanted to present. There was a source of funding to continually develop this work. Experienced alternative theatre groups with a clear organization and management style tended to have a clear work philosophy and continuous organizational development, which allowed the organization to survive." (Damrhung, 2007, p. 45)

Ever since the Tom Yum Kung economic crisis, small-size theatre groups in Thailand have been growing. Many small theatre groups were formed and closed, while some still exist and continue to create work despite problems such as a lack of an audience, long rehearsal times, a lack of compensation for the director, and space rental issues. Other problems included censorship by the government of plays that have clashed with their ideology. This includes closing of many small theatres like the Pridi Panomyong Institute, Crescent Moon Theatre, B-Floor Room, Thonglor Art Space and Democracy Crazy Theatre Studio over the last 2 years (2018–2019).

For this reason, the researcher was interested in studying the existence of small-size theatre companies in Bangkok in order to answer the research question: What cultural roles do small theater companies in Bangkok see for themselves in the 21st century?

Literature Review

In this study, the researchers used the Structural-Functional theory of Talcott Parsons as a framework for the study. The theory speaks of 4 basic functions that enable social systems or various social units to sustainably survive. Chantavanich (2016, p. 165) explained, *"the duty is a group of activities carried out to meet the needs of the social system. Initially, Parsons saw society as a system. In this system society has a duty. There is an activity, but this activity is done in groups and done to meet the needs of the system."*

When comparing theatre companies with this theory, it was found that theatre companies have a group of activities, and social groups formed to meet the needs of the social system with various duties. Srisawad (2012, p. 39) said:

"Parsons has provided a model of Structural-Functional theory with 4 functional components for every action system. If a system requires survival or sustained existence, it must involve a set of activities that focus on the needs of the system. These activities include adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Latency (L)."

Chantavanich (2016, p. 166–171) explained the 4 basic duties established by Parsons, which included the following details:

"(1) Adaptation is the way that organizations in society adapt to situation, environment and system requirements. If things do not meet the requirements of the system, they must be adjusted. (2) Goal Attainment is that society must set its goals and all systems must also be responsible for setting the main goals. (3) Integration is the creation of a coherent relationship between various systems. (4) Latency is the maintenance and restoration of individual motives and social patterns."

Basic functions will comply with the 4 Social Subsystems in society, that can be discussed in detail and are as seen the following diagram: (Chantavanich 2016, p. 166–171)

Table 1 Basic functions and subsystem of society in Structural-Functional theory

Basic Functions	Subsystem of Society
1. Adaptation	Economic
2. Goal Attainment	Political
3. Integration	Societal / Community
4. Latency	Fiduciary

In this article, the author studied the role of adaptation, which is the first duty that an organization can create in order to survive, and the economic system of theatre companies. As for the economic system, the study linked the Structural-Functional Theory with the principles of management in art and culture organizations. Byrnes (2009, p. 16) claimed that “it consisted of 4 duties: (1) Planning (2) Organizing (3) Leading (4) Controlling.”

The researcher focused on the aspect of planning because it is the first step to create the direction of the organization as Danthamrongkul (2003, p. 128) explained *“Planning is the process of setting objectives and course of action in order to achieve the goal, which is the result that one wants to achieve in order to clearly define the direction of the organization.”* The researcher used the definition to ask questions in order to identify the purpose of establishing a theatre group.

Methodology

This research used the Phenomenological approach. The qualitative research methodology using in-depth interviews was used. The collected data were analyzed to find out how and why small-sized theatre companies were established and continued to exist.

Scope of Population and Sample Groups

Population groups

Population groups were selected from the list of the theatre groups participating in the Bangkok Theatre Festival, using the information from 2002, which was the first year the festival was organized, and information in subsequent years, namely 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017. From the above study, it was found that the total population consisted of 129 groups.

Criteria for selection of sample groups

The researcher specified the sample group using 7

criteria, which were as follows:

1. The company must have no more than 12 primary members.
2. The company normally performed in small theatres with no more than 120 seats.
3. The company must have been in operation for at least 7 years and operating continuously to the present day.
4. There are ongoing performances, both in or outside the country, with at least 1 show a year.
5. The main activity of the companies is theatre performance and most of the performances' tickets are commercially sold to the general public.
6. The main target group is an adult audience.
7. The company has freedom to create alternative work rather than mainstream drama.

Sample

From the above criteria, the researcher established a sample group to conduct this research, consisting of 7 theatre groups, as follows: (1) the Crescent Moon Theatre Company; (2) B-Floor Theatre; (3) 8 x 8 Theatre Company; (4) New Theatre Society; (5) Naked Masks Group; (6) Anatta Theatre Troupe; and (7) Pichet Klunchun Dance Company.

Results

From interviews with directors, producers, and founders of the 7 theatrical groups, the reasons for the establishment and their objectives can be found as follows:

Crescent Moon Theatre

The Crescent Moon was created by a new generation of university students who wanted to use literature, theater and the performing arts as a tool to present their ideas about the political system and the era of dictatorship in which democracy was seized by military power. The Crescent Moon began in 1969 and later, in 1975, Khamron Kunadilok, one of the members of the club, collaborated with actors from various universities to create drama with the objective of revealing urban society and various issues, including living problems and the rights of Thai people in rural and remote areas. (Crescent Moon Theatre, 2008)

The current mission of the Crescent Moon is to create the art of drama that reflects society and people in the society. They also want the audience to think and ask questions about what they have seen and to awaken themselves.

“Theater arts is not entertainment. It's not pure art, but it's a medium that will inspire, present dramatic arts, and make people learn about social problems. We have a duty

to shake the mind or question the audience or society to think. Our main agenda is audience development." (Sineenadh Keitprapai, Interview, 2019).

The Crescent Moon Theatre has the image of being a troupe that talks mostly about politics, including various social issues based on the interests of the director of each story. "*The image of the Crescent Moon Theater is political theater, but can actually be interpreted as a social concern and issue. Everything is political.*" (Sineenadh Keitprapai, Interview, 2019).

B-Floor Theatre Company

B-Floor Theater Company is a theater company that has its roots from the Crescent Moon Theater Company since its founding members were former members of the Crescent Moon. The B-Floor Theatre Company was established with the objective of being a space for experimentation. "*B-Floor is like a playing field for members who come to work and feel safe in experimenting with various issues that are connected to society or a personal matter that can be connected to society*" (Jarunarn Phantachat, interview, 2019).

In addition, most of the presented issues were related to social structure at the macro level such as a commentary on society, politics and relations between government – people, violence and marginalized people.

"In making an art work, we have to find tools, especially language or grammar, which is the body in the way of B-Floor representations. Certainly, in our B-Floor work, many pieces are about freedom, oppression, violence, marginalized people, social structure, reversal political situations, and the state and the people." (Teerawat Mulvilai, interview, 2019).

One important factor emerged when Teerawat Mulvilai said that the reason the B-Floor Theater Company maintains and consistently creates works is the political context in Thailand.

"When the coup came, I was driven by anger in the feeling of discontent. So, I couldn't stand it. I had to do something. As an artist, I think that each person has freedom because an artist does not have just tools or being just an actor but you can create theatre work, which is the space that allows everyone to share their thoughts." (Teerawat Mulvilai, Interview, 2019).

The 8 X 8 Theatre Company

The 8 X 8 Theater Company is a theater company formed in 1998 by Nikorn Sae Tang with a few other friends, with the objective of talking about various things and issues in society that they want to communicate

through the works of their own company. "*After graduating and acting in plays for other people, I realized in doing that I was only a fraction of it. It was not truly my voice. Should I do something that really is my own voice and also my own work?*" (Nikorn Sae Tang, Interview, 2019).

With regard to the issues that the 8 X 8 Troupe presents, there are a variety of topics and they are not specifically related to any certain subject, but depend on the interests of the director., But most importantly, these issues must be linked to humanity in present context. "*We have no specific topic to present. It will change continuously depending on what issues affect us then and that can be connected to humans and today's society.*" (Nikorn Sae Tang, Interview, 2019).

Naked Masked Theatre Company

The Naked Masks Theatre Company was founded in 2003 by the leader, Ninart Boonpoothong, with fellow actors, beginning with the establishment of the Dream Mask Troupe before changing to the Naked Masks Troupe later. The purpose of the formation of the theater company is to create an artistic theater area that is not only the physical area, but a mental area. "*Our desire is to have space for everyone to come back and enjoy making dramas. Space is not only a physical space but is a beginning point of the drama process. And everywhere can be a space.*" (Ninart Boonpoothong, Interview, 2019). After years of working now the company has "The Naked Masks network", the network of drama artists, outstanding especially for youth.

New Theatre Society

The New Theater Society is a group formed in 2007 by drama arts teachers who studied in England and the United States to create a small contemporary theater, using selective translations and/or works adapted from interesting foreign plays to present ideas on various social issues. The New Theater Society is a leisurely social gathering for fun and work for group members. "*To be honest, I do not believe in creating a system like a big or formal theatre company. I have tried that, but it is not successful in the context that I grew up in. Therefore, we did not form the company formally, we gathered together loosely.*" (Damkerng Thitapiyasak, Interview, 2019).

"We group together to be "Emotional food, intellectual candy" and to party for fun. Not for politics. Not for society. But for what we love. Having fun together is a serious hobby. Entertainment is a more important factor than talking about politics or being angry. We don't have a formal year plan. We enjoy it, but we have very strong intentions when we work." (Parnrut Kritchanchai, Interview, 2019).

The Anatta Theatre Troupe

The Anatta Theater Troupe, founded in 2012, is a group of 3 actors, Pradit Prasartthong, Duangjai Hiransri and Sarayut Petchsamrit. Although it is the youngest company, all 3 members are former members of the Makhampom Theater Company (a well-known theatrical group for community), and have had extensive experience in drama production for many decades.

The Anatta Theater troupe creates a drama in order to present a wide range of social, political, and ideological issues, through a presentation format that often brings Thai literature and Thai history as a story to pose various questions to the audience.

"I am good at taking old stories to retell and reflect to the present society. In the first 4–5 years I took stories that people might have forgotten in contemporary history after the change of political system. The story is a political matter asking people who or what you are now currently serving, and for what reason. After seeing the play, you must have conscience with yourself, ask questions about your yourself, have inspiration and power to handle current problems. This is the purpose of what we are doing." (Pradit Prasartthong, Interview, 2019).

Pichet Klunchun Dance Company

Pichet Klunchun Dance Company is a contemporary Thai dance group. Although the company was established in 2010, Pichet Klunchun started to work as a full-time artist in 2001, with 3 obvious objectives.

"First, I have been trying to figure out how Thai Dance, movement and art knowledge will be brought to use and develop. Second, I will look at society, politics or what happened or topics that interest me at the time. Third, myself. I will work on these 3 elements and the created work piece." (Day Poets Company Limited, 2013).

Pichet Klunchun also confirmed that being an artist can be a profession and he wanted to be an example and an inspiration for future artists.

"First, no one who has graduated in Thai dance has his own theatre. Second, I have my own company. Third, I have my own dancers. Forth, I have my own work and still travel and perform on my own. It has never happened before in the history of this country. I want the next generation to see what I have done and think about it." (Day Poets Company Limited, 2013).

Summary

1. Small-size theater companies in Bangkok were established to express perspectives and criticize society on

various issues through the performing arts. They have acted in accordance with the adaptation of Structural-Functional theory, using the context and social issues of each period as a database.

2. In terms of planning organizations, based on management according to the principles of art and cultural organizations regarding organizational objectives, the study found that these small theater companies in Bangkok saw themselves as providing independent voices and critical perspectives on neglected aspects of contemporary Thai society.

Discussion

From the research, the study found interesting phenomena, as follows:

4 of 7 Theatre Companies Prominently Presented Political Issues

Regarding the issues presented by 7 theatrical groups, there were various political and social issues. There were 4 theater groups that chose to prominently present political issues: the Crescent Moon Theater Company, the B-Floor Theater Company, the Anatta and Pichet Klunchun Dance Company groups. However, these 4 groups also presented other issues besides politics, depending on the interests of the director of each piece. The other 3 theater companies, 8 × 8, New Theater Society and Naked Masks, presented current social issues or topics that the director was interested in, such as religion, culture, humanity, family, love etc. The Naked Masks company also focused on youth issues and networks.

Theatrical Art is Independent Media and a Space to Express Thoughts on Taboo Matters

Today, Thai society has a democratic form of government with the King as the Head of State, but it has a political history of numerous coups and laws that control political expression and the government. Some social and political issues are taboo and therefore cannot be discussed openly, especially in the commercial and mainstream media. "Theatrical art" is therefore an independent, alternative media and an outlet for artists who want to express their ideas and views. Because artists can enter the symbolic realm, the underlying metaphor is to communicate particular ideas through the performing arts. The results of the research reflected the situation, as nearly half of all theaters were concerned with political issues that they presented through their work, through dance, body movement and spectacle to communicate with the audience, rather than just presenting the text.

Small Theater Companies Exist for Ideological Battles and Political Communication

The existence of small theater companies reflected the political struggles of the artists, such as the emergence of the Crescent Moon Club in 1969, which then became the Crescent Moon Theatre. The drama was created by intellectual students who expressed free thought during the military seizure of power, a situation that still exists today. Sprouting from the Crescent Moon Theatre, the B-Floor Theater Company continues to present ideas, including criticism of the social structure, politics and relations between the government and the people. The Anatta Theater Troupe, whose founders and members had previously been in the Makhampom Theater Company, developed from political theater groups, used the theater as a medium for community development and presented works on politics, society and ideology through the contemporary Thai style. This includes the Pichet Klanchun Dance Company, which uses contemporary Thai dance to express the ideology of the company through politics and society.

This phenomenon demonstrated that small theater companies were established to express the ideas, beliefs and ideologies of the theater to society with the hope that the value and ideas of the work will reflect society in order to encourage further development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Small-sized theater companies in Bangkok were formed independently with the objective of demonstrating ideology and presented their works without being under the

influence of any department or business interests. The theater companies are quite free to present the truth in society, criticize and present ideas on social issues and the current political situation. Therefore, studying the work of a small theater group in Bangkok is another way to see the reality, and an aspect of society and politics that cannot be seen in other mainstream media. Studying the work of each theater company in each period will give another dimension to history, the social context and the political climate of that time, which is important in terms of the audience, to have a standing position and a committed ideology, including major backlash in terms of the development of a society and the nation.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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