

## **A Transformative Theatre of Dialogue: The Makhampom Theatre Group's Negotiation of Thailand's State of Repression**

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### **Introduction - History Repeats**

On 14 October 1973, student-led demonstrations led to a brutal military crackdown, the collapse of the Thanom Kittikachorn dictatorship and the establishment of a new constitutional democracy. Three years later, on 6 October 1976, this period of 'democratic sunshine' was suppressed by a brutal military purge that began with paramilitary and state forces attacking students inside Thammasat University in Bangkok resulting in scores of deaths, disappearances, and exiled activists. On 6 October and 14 October 2013, the Makhampom Theatre Group performed the *likay*-circus production, *The Miracle of the Blood Throne* (*The Blood Throne*), at Thammasat University in Bangkok as part of commemorations marking the fortieth anniversary of the 1973 democratic uprising and these performances represented a transformative moment in the group's history.

For Makhampom, performing at the October Event commemorations had become a tradition, recognised as an acknowledgment of the legacy of this era in the foundation of the group and Thailand's people's movements. Makhampom's epic theatre-styled October Event productions were also opportunities for the group to critique Thai authoritarianism and the contemporary democracy movement. The 2013 commemoration, marked by performances by Makhampom and several other artists, was to precede a new wave of authoritarian rule and democratic resistance.

Since the early 2000s, Thai politics has been characterised by division, often manifested in acts of civil or state-sponsored violence. The colour-coded politics of Red- and Yellow-Shirts invoked layers of polarities in Thai society - urban versus rural, privileged versus under-privileged, North and Northeast versus Bangkok and the South, new politics versus old politics - subsumed within a meta-narrative of the contest between Thailand's residual hegemonic patrimonial order and emergent forms of modern liberalism. Makhampom's October Event production, *The Blood Throne*, was

devised in response to these conditions of entrenched colour-coded political conflict and authoritarian state hegemony.

After a period of political calm, shortly after *The Blood Throne* performances on October 6 and 14, 2013, Yellow Shirt anti-government protests polarised the Red Shirt-aligned Yingluck Shinawatra administration and triggered Makhampom's implication in the political conflict. Participants in the October Events, portrayed as seditious and Red-shirt sympathisers, became a target of threats and intimidation, Makhampom included. Ironically, for Makhampom, these threats were influenced by the popular success of *The Blood Throne*, with live audiences of approximately 3,000 intellectual and working class activists and an online, predominantly Red-shirt, audience exceeding 30,000. The ideological opposition to the event was by Yellow Shirt-aligned activists, media broadcasters, and parliamentarians, whose vigilance and political disruption instigated a military coup launched by General Prayuth Chan-ocha in May 2014.

The 2014 coup marked a reversion to a level of authoritarianism which has been described by several pro-democracy activists as resembling the post-1976 era.<sup>i</sup> Dramatised warnings of the residual dangers of hegemonic power, evident in Thailand's history of military coups, were portrayed in *The Blood Throne*, becoming almost portentous of the forthcoming events. The reversion to authoritarian rule and Makhampom's visibility within the pro-democracy movement had a pronounced impact on the group.

Makhampom became subject to acts of censorship and intimidation amidst the political arrests, forced exile, and propaganda campaigns that began in late 2013. As this reversion to an authoritarian context accelerated, the potential for politicised public performance diminished and the large-scale contemporary *likay* style of *The Blood Throne* became untenable in the post-coup context due to security crackdowns. In an attempt to sustain its performance practice and active reconciliatory role in the national political conflict led to the concerted development of the new method, called Dialogue Theatre. This method represented both the confluence of the group's body of knowledge and practice as well as a response to this politically volatile context, with its parallels to the 1970s era of agitation and authoritarianism.

## **Makhampom's Full Circle**

Makhampom's foundation in 1980 coincided with a period of pacification of Thailand's exiled or underground Communist and radical Left. The latent political volatility of the 1970s radicalism was evident in Makhampom's body of activist members, aligned to this era, but the shifting context also marked the arrival of a new communitarian movement. This is reflected in the choice of name, 'Makhampom', taken from the Indian gooseberry, and its symbolism as a popular local fruit in rural Thailand, known for its initial bitterness then gradual sweetening effect and its strong medicinal properties. In essence, the name indicated the group's intent - localism, transformative process, and social wellbeing.

Makhampom has been variously described as 'part of a revival effort for the new era of contemporary theatre',<sup>ii</sup> as a socially-engaged theatre group, and as part of a small community theatre trend within the Asian context. In its original iteration as the Grassroot Micro Media Project in 1980, the founding group of volunteers sought 'to produce micro-media for grass-roots advocacy'<sup>iii</sup>, a philosophy that has sustained throughout its history. This is evident in its reformulation as the Makhampom (Community Media) Foundation in 2000, with its stated objective to 'apply theatre as a community media form ... towards transforming Thai society'<sup>iv</sup>.

Essentially, Makhampom has been shaped by two definitive developments in Thai theatre. Firstly, the emergence of non-commercial independent Thai contemporary theatre occurred through the emergence of drama studies in universities in the 1960s and student experimentation with modern Western plays. Secondly, Cold War radicalism on Thai campuses, informed by Thailand's constitutional democratic reform era of the 1930s, saw the proliferation of political theatre groups such as Crescent Moon Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s.

The foundations of a contemporary Thai people's theatre approach was evident in several trends in the 1970s: extending political theatre performance from urban campuses to rural communities; an upsurge of Thai playwriting in recognition of the foreign-ness of Western theatre scripts; and the hybridisation of theatre form and aesthetics, as Thai aesthetics and thematic contexts were blend-

ed with Western acting techniques towards creating a new dramaturgical approach that was both radical and Thai. Significantly, these trends were consistent with post-colonial people's theatre movements throughout the global South.

Makhampom, having become part of a small Thai community theatre movement, was influenced by this legacy of practice. However, the pacification of Thailand's 1970s political movement left gaps in leadership and practice, raising the importance of Asian people's theatre practice as a source of influence. Through its history, collaboration and exchange with groups such as the Asian Centre for People's Culture, the Asian People's Theatre Festival Society in Hong Kong, PETA and Kaliwat (Philippines), Five Arts and Arts Ed (Malaysia), Phare Ponleu Selpak (Cambodia), and Natya Chetana (India), and a series of programs in Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan provided Makhampom with valuable pedagogical and dramaturgical tools and models of practice.

Asian trends in hybrid and neo-traditional theatre, also motivated by principles of popular communication, led to a period of experimentation by Makhampom in the 1990s. This was characterised by fusions of traditional Buddhist and folkloric literature with localised styles of mask, folk dance, popular song, classical dance-drama, and shadow theatre motifs, as well as imported Brechtian, social realist, and musical theatre elements. The group participated in Asian regional collaborations including *Big Wind* and *Cry of Asia*<sup>v</sup>. A European tour of Makhampom's first touring production, *Phitsathan Oei*, in 1992, was referred to as a 'watershed in the development of Thai theatre'<sup>vi</sup>, with Jungwiwattanaporn describing Makhampom's 'distinguished style [that] was the exquisite combination of Thai traditional dance and western physical theatre.'<sup>vii</sup>

In the 2000s, Makhampom's praxis became increasingly pluralist. The group's community theatre-contemporary theatre duality effectively became outmoded as experienced members sought greater agency in the group's direction. This saw a reformulation of the group's theatre-in-community-cultural-development (TCCD) community and contemporary performance practice. Makhampom often referred to its role as a metaphorical 'bird flying between city and village,'<sup>viii</sup> bringing socio-political narratives of the group's prolific community theatre projects<sup>ix</sup> to public urban middle class audiences through public performance.

The process of forming the Makhampom Foundation<sup>x</sup> in the 2000s was both disruptive and an expression of the group's collective identity. The creation of four semi-autonomous program departments – Community, Education, Performance, and International – was as much an indication of the diversified interests of the membership as it was a strategic survival plan, which was the primary motivation for change. It did, however, lead to several important developments which were to later coalesce into the *The Blood Throne* performance at the 2013 October Event and the subsequent Dialogue Theatre project, namely: (i) the Makhampom Art Space; (ii) a national pedagogical and networking role; (iii) a performance laboratory approach; and (iv) the Dialogue Theatre project.

The **Makhampom Art Space** is, in essence, a theatre village located in the countryside district of Chiang Dao in northern Thailand. As a hosting, training, and performance site, it became, and continues to be, the locus of an increasingly localised community theatre program and a social enterprise initiative for the group's sustainability. The high incidence of institutionalised ethnic discrimination, human displacement issues, and inter-communal conflict together with Makhampom's presence within the Chiang Dao district has shaped their community praxis, prompting a two-decade-long program in engaged conflict transformation and community development with local, provincial, national and international reach. Concurrently, the social enterprise program, primarily for hosting international training activities such as the Study Tours running since 1999, has funded the construction of the centre, the running costs of Makhampom, and the community theatre program in Chiang Dao. These programs also engage partner communities in dialogue and exchange, that brings the international and national hosting activities into the locus of community cultural development and socio-political transformation.

A **national pedagogical practice** was initiated by Makhampom's Bangkok-based Education Program team to translate community and performance methodologies into theatre-based learning modules and curricula. A multi-year Teen Theatre for Transformation project, involving the formation of approximately 40 youth theatre groups nation-wide, and a collection of teacher training, student learning, and peer education projects within and outside institutions also resulted in the development of extensive multi- and trans-disciplinary networks. This, in turn, enhanced Makhampom's profile as an umbrella people's theatre organisation in Thailand and as an active member of Thai civil society.

During this post-2000s era, Makhampom's performance practice also transformed, embracing the pluralist principles adopted by the Makhampom Foundation reformulation. Makhampom's hybrid, neo-traditional style traversed Thailand's four generic theatre traditions - folk, classical, popular, and modern - and this diversity of the group's history of practice was reflected in emergent performance streams in *likay* (Thai folk opera), historical drama, puppetry, shadow theatre, children's theatre, and circus. In both Bangkok and Chiang Dao, sorts of **performance laboratories** were formed, with new directors and ensembles producing scores of small, new works for new audiences. Makhampom's contemporary *likay* practice was the most significant development as it implicitly challenged the orthodoxies of socio-cultural stratification, manifested in modernity-tradition, class, and centre-periphery dialectics. The *likay* genre is inherently hybrid in form, traversing folk dance and ritual, classical song and gesture, popular design and song, and modern melodrama and costuming, yet it is stigmatised as folk, subaltern theatre genre. In adapting the *likay* form for traditional and contemporary theatre audiences, Makhampom is playing an ancillary role in challenging the stratification of Thai theatre.

### **A Transformative Theatre of Dialogue**

Notably, this era of change in Makhampom has largely coincided with the colour-coded political conflict that has accentuated the stratification of Thai society along similar lines. The group was sporadically affected by cancellations of performances or visitor programs due to violent manifestations of this conflict. The threat posed by the arbitrary and repressive application of *lese majeste* laws, which criminalise acts deemed defamatory, insulting, or threatening towards the monarchy, was significant enough for Makhampom to screen audiences, including for its 2011 Taipei performances of the *Shadow of the Moon*, its first iteration of Dialogue Theatre. However, it was the performance of *The Blood Throne* and the subsequent military coup that marked the transitional 'full circle' moment in the group's history, positing Makhampom's praxis within this new era of repressive rule with resemblances to the post-1976 dictatorship.

*The Blood Throne* incorporated several elements: the invitation of past members as guest actors as a nod to Makhampom's history; applying the popular contemporary *likay* form to draw mass au-

diences; critiquing patrimonial state authoritarianism and militarism; and provoking public dialogue around the highly sensitive issue of political violence. The German play, *Romulus the Great*<sup>xi</sup>, provided Makhampom with a relevant, allegorical text, an acknowledgment of prevailing political risks. Concurrently, popular performance devices were adopted, including the casting of two professional *likay* actors to draw working class audiences, the addition of an aerial circus act, a style popularised by a recent television contest, *Thailand's Got Talent*, and the guest appearances of three high profile pro-democracy activists.

The popular success of *The Blood Throne* exceeded Makhampom's expectations, but the reconciliatory theme of the work was subsumed within the meta-narrative of Thailand's political conflict, precipitating a series of changes in Makhampom's practice. Yellow-Shirt protests in the weeks following the October Event, the dissolution of parliament in December, and the subsequent military coup on May 22, 2014 represented a chain of events suppressing Thai democracy. Public condemnations of *The Blood Throne* and Makhampom by Yellow-Shirt activists after the performance took on heightened gravity following the declaration of martial law in the post-coup period. Two of Makhampom's guest performers were subject to arrest, imprisonment and exile. Another two artists from the production, *The Wolf Bride*, also performed at the October Event, received multi-year prison sentences under *Lèse-majesté* laws.

Makhampom had not expected the scale of reaction to *The Blood Throne*, neither in terms of the nation-wide popular acclaim nor the vehement condemnation by critics and they did not imagine that the narrative of the work would be portentous of the subsequent military coup. The Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, Brad Adams, suggested that military authorities were extending their crackdown on free speech into the theatre arts sector;<sup>xii</sup> and Makhampom faced arbitrary and coordinated visits by security forces during this period. This suggestion was also evident in the closure of a Dialogue Theatre event in Chiang Mai,<sup>xiii</sup> and performances by radical, contemporary theatre company, B-Floor<sup>xiv</sup> being subject to video surveillance.

For Makhampom, threats to financial sustainability, safety concerns within the group, and the suppression of public performance activities required another reformulation of praxis. Dialogue Theatre, having been conceived in 2011 as a response to Thailand's layers of socio-political polarisa-

tion, was also a low-profile performance approach deemed suited to the repressive political context and in the 2014 post-coup context, it emerged as Makhampom's core theatre approach.

Makhampom began developing the Dialogue Theatre method in 2011 as a response to Thailand's political conflict but also to undertake an explicit interest in applying 'an activist form of dramaturgy which aims to influence and alter the actual world, not just reflect it'.<sup>xv</sup> The group's community praxis was certainly activist in form and intent and the engaged community and pedagogical practice had achieved significant socio-cultural change. The Dialogue Theatre project sought to coalesce Makhampom's community theatre and conflict transformation workshop techniques and their body of performance work into a method aligned to Augusto Boal's notion of a 'constant search for dialogical forms, forms of theatre through which it is possible to converse'.<sup>xvi</sup>

The choice of the name, Dialogue Theatre, illustrated a commitment to a dialogic approach. The disappointment in the group that the reconciliatory intent of *The Blood Throne* was subsumed within the politically polarised context, further encouraged this approach and the discrete, small, targeted audience form of Dialogue Theatre was also seen as suited to the constraints on dialogic space in the post-coup context.

Makhampom's first Dialogue Theatre-inspired production, *Shadow of the Moon*, was performed in Thailand and Taiwan in 2011 as a solo work bringing five different characters into a dialogue about Theatre State constructs of, and controls on, national identity. Despite a series of experimental workshops and minor performance events in the years following the *Shadow of the Moon* production, the development of Dialogue Theatre into a core performance practice was primarily precipitated by the post-coup context and was realised through opportunities for democracy-oriented funding grants. A Dialogue Theatre project, involving three Dialogue Theatre productions and a nation-wide series of workshops, was supported from 2014 to 2017.

The first of these works, *Drama Sunjon*, was devised within the emergent authoritarian context of late 2014, marked by the fears of persecution by Makhampom members. Consequently, the project was initiated in rural northern Thailand, reducing potential scrutiny by authorities due to the regimes' focus on public actions in Bangkok and other urban centres. The themes of structural dis-



crimination and questions of agency for ethnic minority groups were also perceived as safer themes, through which to test the Dialogue Theatre method. However, by 2016, Makhampom was able to make clearer risk assessments and the second and third works, *Holding Time* and *The Voice*, more explicitly addressed the political conflict themes associated with *The Blood Throne* performances.

Each production applied a Dialogue Theatre framework, which adapted and evolved throughout the process. The model for a Dialogue Theatre performance included a devised, character-driven play (The Play), typically a 20-30 minute conflict scenario, and an immersive, moderated dialogue process (The Dialogue), which may run from 30 minutes to 3 hours with invited audiences of 30-60 people. The methodology sought to weave together several precepts: (i) the representation of multiple, diverse, conflicted voices on stage; (ii) actors performing both The Play and The Dialogue in character; (iii) achieving a level of 'believable truth' as a measure of authenticity; (iv) active, reflexive audience engagement; (v) balancing discomfort and safety; and (vi) individual and collective transformative outcomes.

### ***On diverse voices***

In the early 2000s, Makhampom became active in applying theatre in conflict contexts in Thailand and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Explorations of conflict transformation methodologies prompted a review of its binary approach to socially-engaged theatre, consistent with trends in post-modern discourse. Prentki refers to the 'reification of a fixed binary' of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' becoming increasingly distorted in the contemporary world.<sup>xvii</sup> This distortion and complexity was evident in Makhampom's two decade-long localised community praxis in Chiang Dao, marked by the continuity and distortion of oppressor-oppressed binaries within a complex interplay of power relations and social, cultural and political systems and structures.

This trend in Makhampom's praxis translated in the core Dialogue Theatre tenet of multiple and diverse character voices being represented on stage. The first Dialogue Theatre devising exercise explores different perspectives relating to the identified conflict theme as the basis for diverse

character identities and voices, which, in turn, becomes the vehicle for bringing complexity into the dialogue process.

The three Dialogue Theatre performances in the project indicated that the diversity of characters on stage made Dialogue Theatre accessible to a similar diversity of audiences. Audiences consistently embraced the opportunity to engage with diverse voices, suggesting a willingness to enter the imagined space of The Dialogue and its complex interplay of interactions within and between audience and characters. In the case of *Drama Sunjon*, a dialogue panel comprising a policeman, migrant worker, doctor, *Dara'ang* student, and university professor appears implausible within Thailand's stratified society. However, audience members appeared to accept the imagined aspect of the Dialogue by actively engaging with 'the Familiar', as occurred with indigenous students connecting with the indigenous character, Sopha, and 'the Other', such as with the animated sharing of grievances with the policeman, Prayut.

### ***On character acting***

There was consensus amongst the body of Makhampom actors that the character acting process, particularly in the character devising and development workshops, was an empowering theatrical process. Concurrently, they referred to high level of the difficulty in embodying and sustaining these characterisations for long periods. Metaxis, or 'the process whereby a person in role is able to both perform and view that performance',<sup>xviii</sup> was imperative to the character acting craft. This was particularly important in *Holding Time*, where fears associated with the military government's persecution of free speech through *Lèse-majesté* and other security laws meant that actors also had to manage risk whilst improvising in-character throughout The Dialogue.

In *Drama Sunjon* and *Holding Time*, the actors involvement in the devising of character and scenario was also seen as crucial to the character acting craft. Using familiarity, interest, and lived experience to guide character development and a degree of type-casting, actors often developed characters close to their own beliefs and identity. In *The Voice*, the inter-generational Makhampom cast and the transgender identity of one actor became central to the characterisations and informed the performance narrative and dialogue.

## ***On authenticity***

Makhampom adopted the concept of 'believable truth' in addressing the contested area of authenticating conventions in immersive performance. Portrayals of characters who were manifestly different to the actor, whether in belief or identity, raised both questions regarding authenticity as well as the facilitation of the real-imagined dialectic of The Dialogue, which was central to an effective dialogue process. The 'believable truth' principle, a concept consistent with Stanislavski's method acting approach, became measurable in terms of audience engagement with the character. This became contingent on the character development process, often involving extensive research, observation, and character improvisation techniques, towards the actor 'finding the truth' in the character and then sincerely representing that truth.

Audience interests in engaging in sincere and serious dialogue with a character placed an onus on the actor's ability to represent that character in the improvised dialogue process. In *Drama Sunjon*, an indigenous *Karen* actor's direct cultural knowledge and lived experience could be imparted on his characterisation of Tupo and the characterisation of Sopha was informed by the strong familiarity with the experiences of a member of a youth theatre group member from Makhampom's partner Pang Daeng Nok community and indigenous audience members to identify closely with the both of these characters. The policeman, Prayut, became the target of numerous audience members, explained by one in terms of the lack of real opportunities in Thai society to challenge the authority of the police. The actor's complex characterisation of Prayut, manifested in his emotive defence and counter-challenges to audiences, resulted in the actor being questioned on several occasions after performance if he was a 'real' policeman.

In essence, Makhampom learnt that achieving authenticity in the dialogue process was predicated on the acknowledgment of 'believable truth' in the characters. It was clear that audiences were constantly negotiating the dynamic, fluid space between the 'imagined' - the characters and The Play - and the 'real' - the audience and their role in The Dialogue and their 'belief' in the characters was central to effective audience engagement.

## ***On audience engagement***

An effective dialogue process was also seen as contingent on addressing sensitive socio-political topics through the creation of what Makhampom refers to as a 'safe space to converse with the Other'. Audience members' affinities or grievances with the diversity of characters typically triggered emotional interactions with characters, whether based on cultural or socio-political affiliations or notionally 'oppositional' perspectives.

The transition from Play to Dialogue is facilitated by the Mod, as moderator of the Dialogue, who, in *Drama Sunjon* and *Holding Time*, also performed minor character roles. Similar to Boal's Joker, as active facilitator of the Forum Theatre process, the Mod has the responsibility of enabling critical engagement between actor and audience through 'a constant, dialectical flow.'<sup>xix</sup> The dialogue process sought to harness the audience's emotional connection to story and character through different 'icebreaking' devices. After introducing the dialogue process to the audience, the Mod invites each character to join a stage panel and share their names and concerns as an indication of their commitment to engage in dialogue and re-affirm their continued performance in-character.

The dialogue process runs as a fluid, dynamic process, traversing several intentions: identifying and acknowledging audience affiliations with characters and scenario; provoking debate around questions of 'who needs to change'; and suggestions for transforming the conflict context. This flexibility was identified as necessary to translate the diverse representation of voices on stage to similar participation of audiences, noting that the layers of social hierarchy in Thai society constrain equitable participation in public discourse. A dynamic relationship between Mod and characters and a 'toolkit' of dialogue 'workshop' exercises - Hot Seat, Chat Circles, and Closing Dialogue<sup>xx</sup> - provided the flexibility necessary for encouraging diverse participation.

The small group Chat Circles were applied in the majority of performances. In *Drama Sunjon*, this process was identified by a group of nursing students as the appropriate opportunity to open up their previously concealed indigenous identities after connecting with Sopha's experiences of mockery and discrimination within the centralised education system. Similarly, the intimacy of the

Chat Circles allayed the fears and concerns of several audience members in engaging in dialogue on the sensitive issues of political conflict at *Holding Time* performances.

### ***On discomfort and safety***

The fears associated with the military government's persecution of free speech through *Lèse-majesté* and other security laws meant that elements of suspicion and mistrust affected audience engagement. At the same time, audience feedback and the multiple requests to host *Holding Time* performances reinforced Makhampom's understanding that Dialogue Theatre had become a viable reconciliatory platform within the current political climate. A common view was that the performances were unique in creating a space where Red- and Yellow-shirt supporters could engage in dialogue. In particular, the third person nature of the character role was considered important in mediating the occasionally emotionally-charged debate and facilitating a level of safety for honest and sincere engagement.

The Mod's introduction to The Dialogue includes an acknowledgment that the audience members may experience discomfort through their engagement in the process and the conflict themes and dilemmas triggered deep emotional feelings or traumas for some audience members. For others, the process of speaking to, or sharing grievances with, the 'Other' represented a difficult act of engagement with oppositional or conflicting voices in the oppressor-oppressed dialectic. A process of cognitive dissonance amongst audience members was common, particularly where inherent ideological and attitudinal biases are challenged by the critical conscientisation process of the dialogue. This was evident in the closing process of *The Voice*, when audience members were requested to adjudicate on the 'most convincing character voice', challenging subjective biases through a reflexive approach.

### ***On transformation***

The transformative intent of the Dialogue Theatre was at the heart of its development. The connection, or *sympathis*, with a character meant that transformative change in that character would invoke a process of cognitive dissonance. The notion of dilemma became central to this process, as

dilemma, by implication, explores the idea of dissonance through choice. Consequently, the transition from *The Play* into *The Dialogue* shifted the focus from the conflict protagonists to the 'dilemma character', typically caught in the middle of the conflict. In *Drama Sunjon*, whilst *The Play* explored systemic discrimination against ethnic minority groups within the Thai public health system culminating in a confrontation between the policeman, Prayut, and the injured migrant worker, Tupo, the ethical dilemma facing the doctor, Jaidao, became the stimulus for *The Dialogue*.

Audience feedback during *Drama Sunjon* performances encouraged Makhampom to increase the emphasis on solutions or, at least, positive change. This became a more explicit part of the dialogue process with the Mod integrating a form of inquiry around 'suggestions for change' to encourage reflexive responses amongst characters and audience members alike. The closing dialogue typically involved characters and sometimes audience members identifying aspects of change or transformation they have experienced through *The Dialogue* or intend to address through action beyond the performance space. Suggestions during dialogue processes for a joint hospital-local government plan to fund and train ethnic minority translators in the Mae Sai district of northern Thailand and a cultural training course added to the curriculum of a Chiang Mai nursing college were both realised as post-performance actions.

The importance of audience diversity in shaping transformative outcomes was also evident in many performances. In *Drama Sunjon*, the presence of health workers alongside indigenous communities with lived experience of discrimination in the public health system, extended the engagement with the Other beyond the audience dialogue with characters. Attitudinal change, such as through the reconciliatory process of increased understanding, acknowledgement, and tolerance of other perspectives, reflected the importance of critical consciousness in achieving these personal transformations.

*The Voice* performances expanded the dialogue into addressing meta-narratives regarding Thai-ness, contested constructs of Thai democracy. As such, this involved a discourse that traversed questions of governance, class, gender identity, religion, and military rule. It also emerged that

Makhampom's Dialogue Theatre also created distortions in the center-periphery and class biases that permeate Thailand's contemporary theatre, due to the rural subaltern background of the majority of the actors and the project's locus in the remote, rural district of Chiang Dao. This challenged common assumptions by audience members that the actors would necessarily be of urban, middle-class, intellectual background.

## Conclusion

The significance of the state of political repression was illustrated by it taking until the third work in this Dialogue Theatre triumvirate, *The Voice*, for Makhampom to be able to reclaim the contemporary *likay* form and political conflict themes of *The Blood Throne*. Although each of the Dialogue Theatre productions has been celebrated as a new development in Thai theatre, audiences commented that *The Voice* was not only more familiar as a Makhampom theatre style but in bringing its characteristic humour and playfulness into the dialogic space, the work was also more effective in creating relaxed and accessible conditions for audience engagement. This re-affirms Makhampom's hybrid approach to its people's theatre praxis, reflecting in the integration of form, context, and intent.

Makhampom's members consider the Dialogue Theatre project to be one of the most significant developments in the group's history of praxis. This relates to both the methodological development of this new theatre method and the political context within which it has emerged. Makhampom's commitment to playing an active, visible role within the disparate democracy movement, both latent and emergent, and the implications of the 2013 October Event performances of *The Blood Throne* also indicate the legacy of the 1970s democracy movement is carried within the group's praxis.

Through its explicit opposition to the military regime and its Theatre State ideology, Makhampom's active mediatory role within Thailand's pro-democratic movement signalled its commitment to a politicised contemporary theatre practice. Concurrently, Makhampom had also maintained a politically non-aligned, neutrality to accommodate the diversity within its membership, which is reflected

in the plurality of its praxis. The Dialogue Theatre project operates alongside Makhampom's ongoing community, pedagogical, international exchange, and diverse performance programs. Yet, it also represents an intersectional praxis, incorporated into each of these programs and coalescing the group's history of practice as a people's theatre group.

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## **Endnotes**

- <sup>i</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul interview in Drennan, Justin. 'Interview: Thai Democracy Is Gone and Won't Return Anytime Soon'. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/25/interview-thai-democracy-is-gone-and-wont-return-anytime-soon/>. November 25, 2014 (accessed February 12, 2018).
- <sup>ii</sup> Jungwiwattanaporn, Parichat. 'Contemporary Theatre in Thailand: A Profile.' SPAFA Journal 9, no. 2 (1998): 9.
- <sup>iii</sup> Barber, Richard. Performing Praxis, Community Culture, and Neo-Traditionalism: A Study of Thailand's Makhampom Theatre Group. PhD Thesis. Monash University Melbourne, 2007, 135.
- <sup>iv</sup> Taken from the Makhampom Foundation's Mission Statement. See Barber, *Performing Praxis*, 297.
- <sup>v</sup> 'Cry of Asia' ran from 1989-1997 as an annual Philippine-led Asian theatre collaboration with actors from up to a dozen Asian countries touring internationally in Asia and Europe. 'Big Wind' was a Hong-Kong-produced Asian theatre collaboration touring 7 Asian countries in 1994-95, inspired by 'Cry of Asia,' and described as 'a collaboration of popular theatre workers - East and West.' References from Makhampom documentation.
- <sup>vi</sup> Kerdarunsuksri, Kittisak. The Transposition of Traditional Thai Literature into Modern Stage Drama: The Current Development of Thai Theatre. PhD Thesis. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2001, 9.
- <sup>vii</sup> Jungwiwattanaporn, *Contemporary Theatre in Thailand*, 10.
- <sup>viii</sup> Barber, *Performing Praxis*, 75.
- <sup>ix</sup> Makhampom received multi-year funding from international development agencies to deliver theatre for community development projects in village communities in four provinces addressing social and health issues such as child sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS stigmatisation, and indigenous rights.
- <sup>x</sup> The Makhampom Foundation was founded primarily to increase access to funding in order to retain the pool of senior volunteers and sustain its praxis.
- <sup>xi</sup> Romulus der Große (Romulus the Great) was written by German playwright, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, in 1949 as a melodramatic portrayal of the demise of the Roman Empire.
- <sup>xii</sup> See Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: Theater Activists Jailed for Insulting Monarchy', *Human Rights Watch*, August 20, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/20/thailand-theater-activists-jailed-insulting-monarchy> (Accessed January 30, 2018).

- <sup>xiii</sup> Chiang Mai University denied access to the booked venue for the commemorative event in recognition of scholar Nidhi Eoseewong, understood as related to the pro-democracy nature of the forum, which included Makhampom's work.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Bang Lamerd*, performed by B-Floor in Bangkok in 2015, involved military video surveillance at each performance, ironically resulting in full houses with attendance becoming seen as a form of political resistance.
- <sup>xv</sup> Haedicke, Susan. 'Dramaturgy in Community-Based Theatre.' *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XIII, no. 1, (1998): 132.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Boal, Augusto. *Legislative Theatre*. London & New York: Routledge Press, 1998, 4.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Prentki, Tim. *Applied Theatre: Development*, The Applied Theatre Reader series. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008, 21.
- <sup>xviii</sup> O'Connor, Peter & Anderson, Michael. *Applied Theatre: Research (Radical Departures)*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, 69.
- <sup>xix</sup> Prentki, *Applied Theatre*, 76.
- <sup>xx</sup> The 'toolkit' of dialogue methods consist of the Chat Circle (small group discussions), Hot Seat (grievance-based discussion with individual characters), Stage Debate (audience participation on stage in debate on divisive conflict theme), and Missing Voice (individual audience members on stage proposing other voices for dialogue). These methods are applied to compliment the Open Dialogue and Closing Dialogue according to audience and performance contexts.