

QUEER IMAGES IN THAI CONTEMPORARY DANCE A CASE STUDY OF 18 MONKEYS DANCE THEATRE

Dr. Sun Tawalwongsri

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand

E-mail: sun.ta@ssru.ac.th, sundancetheatre@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article *Queer Images in Thai Contemporary Dance: A Case Study of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre* is part of qualitative research about Gender Diversity in Thai Contemporary Dance. It has used the case study research method by selecting dance performances of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre directed by Jitti Chompee. The researcher focuses on contemporary dance making that demonstrates queer images through the performance elements. The outcomes of this research are the guidelines of the creative contemporary dance process to exhibit concepts of queer and gender diversity for further research. The research includes: literature reviews, in-depth interviews with experts involved in dance creation, direct experience of the researcher participating as a performer in these two performances, data collection and fieldwork studies.

The researcher concluded that the creative dance process of Jitti Chompee has queer images and has an aspect of gender diversity. These can be explained as performance components include: Dance Plot, Dance Performers, Choreography and Site-Specific theatre space. Moreover, the research discovered that the queer images in these performances are connected to three different aspects: 1) Individuality or identity of the creator 2) Guidelines for the use of gender symbolism 3) Reflecting gender diversity in contemporary Thai society through dance. These results and mentioned aspects are all in accordance with the research objectives.

Keywords: Queer images, Thai Contemporary Dance, 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre, Gender Diversity

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary dance performance in present day has no limitation and has no constant presentation style. Moreover, the creators are requiring to search for the issues or the new guidelines prior to bring for practicing. Then, the contemporary dance can combine with science and other fields of contemporary arts regardless of fashion, installation, music and technology. In this case, it has the efforts to make "up to date" or to "modernize" for the contemporary dance around the clock (Noisette Philippe 2011: 18). In the same way, this article of the contemporary dance performance has the motivation from the researcher; who participates to work and has the experience with the team of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre. Similarly, Jitti Chompee has to take charge and choreograph the style of this contemporary dance company. What's more, he has his own requirement to setup the new style of contemporary dance in Thailand beginning with creating the works under the name of *24 Hours* for the Patravadi Theatre in 2007. In this case, Jitti has accepted that gathering up the co-worker dancers and the working style to be designed in the first period should be mixed with the Modern Dance and Ballet as the main part. Then, after setting up his company; it should develop the contemporary dance with other fields of arts by presenting the views of gender conditions increasingly (Chompee, 2016). Later, the subject of queer images, homosexuality and homoerotic scene have come to be the significant part of the creative thought process for dance company in serious way. Moreover, the first show of *18 Monkeys (2010)* is the origin of the name for the dance theatre company. Queer is an acceptance of otherness, whether defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Gerstner, 2006: xi). In this case, queer means people who recognize that they are one part of LGBTQ Community or who doesn't want to specify his or her sexual uniqueness and also doesn't want to be in the standard of heterosexual norms (Kathy and

Marke, 2011:10). Then, queer dance focuses on “LGBTQ identity and community, also draws on a more expansive notion of ‘queer,’ a broader challenge to social norms” (Croft, 2017:2). Then, many masterworks of Jitti Chompee can be defined as a queer dance performance.

Additionally, *18 Monkeys* is a part of Ramakien story (Ramayana in Thai version). Jitti Chompee chose one episode between Kasorntamala (monkey) and Mungornkan (demon). They are each other’s mate. However, Kasorntamala was commanded by Rama or the boss to help him kill his friend in the battlefield. According to the information searched by Jitti, this literature has hid the thought of gender condition. Thus, it has question about these characters; why the yellow male monkey has the name in the same way as the female and the flower. Besides, it has its own good smell on the body with its duty to wait in the luxury bedroom of Rama. What’s more, they also wonder why the monkey is the mate of the demon; so, the answer may be because they have the same gender. On the other hand, the war and the relationship between king Rama, the money; Kasorntamala and the demon; Mungornkan are the result of the show with awkward gender image. Similarly, the gender issue in our Thai literature can be the motivation to create the dance of Jitti. What’s more, it is said that some parts of Ramakien claim about the awkward sexuality with the impression and the imagination, such as Totsakan or Ravana the demon king in Thai Version). Then, it has the enthusiasm to alter itself to have sexual relations with several kinds of animals, such as to have the wife as the fish and the elephant. Thus, this way he can express the rudeness of gender, type and the awkward taste (Chompee, 2016). With this case, it has seen that Thai society still, has the queer images express through arts and literature works. On the other hand, some pieces intentionally manifest gender condition subject without shyness. Then, when the information is presented, there’s no need to be shy because it is just only the general subjects of gender; gender conditions to be revealed in the public. Furthermore, after developing the pieces of work and practicing to have better experience in the field of choreography; as well as being successful from the show performing of *18 Monkeys* (2010). Jitti Chompee has established 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre Company in 2010 in a formal way in order to develop the dance work continuously with the interests; to study further about this subject. Therefore, the main objective of this study is about queer images in Thai contemporary dance by using 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre as the research case study. Thus, the information grasped from this study can be applied to create the work history, the queer and the history of contemporary dance in Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher has setup the Case Study Research by applying the Field Study. Then, the researcher in behalf of the insider; has the participation as the performer to the team of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre. Then, it can utilize the information from the creative process to be analyzed, discussed and made conclusion. With this condition, the Case Study Research has focused on studying about the In-depth Study and exploration about the contemporary phenomenon under the context of the real environment (Yin, 2003:13) by applying the equipment and the research steps as follows:

1. Exploring to survey the information of academic documents, books, researches, articles and other IT Medias relative to the team, the Thai and the foreign contemporary dance style.
2. Applying the direct experience of the performers in the team of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre by using the deep information.
3. Applying the In-depth interview with Jitti Chompee as the establisher and the artistic designer of the company, involving the creative views and applying of Queer Images and Gender diversity in the show.
4. Arranging thoughts and the opinions from the interviews to find the answers involving in the Queer thoughts existing in the show and the festivals of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre team. Then, bring the information to publicize; for the purpose of creating the history and the knowledge of performing arts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The creative process to design the dance of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre by Jitti Chompee has involved with the presentation of queer images and the aspect of gender diversity. Moreover, it consists of several scenes in the show to be concluded as follows:

1) Dance Plot: The motivation of the producer was taken from the literature with the outline of gender and homosexuality, it can be seen obviously from creating of masterworks under the research title of *A Love Song* (2011) and *Demon in Venice* (2012). Moreover, although the previous show has been setup, the team has applied the literature to reflect of the gender issues, such as *Carmen* (2009) and Thai literature; namely: *Sudsakorn* (2010) and *18 Monkeys* (2010). In addition, the interesting point of Jitti is still relative to the charm of applying the literature with the motivation. Similarly, he says that “Although the influence of Thai literature has reflected to the gender issue, it hasn't claimed about the third gender or the differences of gender. Therefore, if we have taken interest to the varieties of gender increasingly, by reading the work of Jean Genet and Thomas Mann, our identity has expressed clearly (Chompee, 2016). In the same way, as for the literature named *A Love Song* (2011) inspired by Jean Genet's film and poetry. Jiti Chompee has used the story of two male prisoners from the silent and old scene movie under the title of *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950). Thus, it has come to the presentation of homosexuality and homoerotic scene through the dancing of the dancers and the actors in several fields; including the methods of painting, the using of poem language and the creation of music through the dancers. Genet used “his experiences in prison would inform much of his work. The homosexuals, prostitutes, thieves and outcasts of his plays are trapped in self-destructive circles.” (18 Monkeys Dance Theatre, 2017). In this case, according to the show; *A Love Song* (2011), Jiti Chompee portrayed identities of homosexuality from Genets film and poetry to stage performance and expressed through the performers and the characters which “can be a way to articulate and negotiate the perception of gender diversity to the audiences” (Tawalwongsri 2012: 220). Jiti Chompee says that with his insolence and straightforwardness; he is different from our Thai people to make the characteristic of expressing arts work not in the same way as others (Chompee, 2016). Indeed, the gender issue and the insolence are the basic subject of our human-beings. In this case, the western literature can reveal about the gender issue in direct way and more severe. Then, it makes us feel satisfied about gender issue with western literature more than our Thai literature. Therefore, it is hard to avoid the terms of creating the image of homosexuality in obvious way or having the communication of the third gender if the producer is gay. With this case, the gender taste might be in another way as same as the poem and the movie of Jean Genet; describing the identity and the mind sets of the poets in the gender views. Then, the work of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre is still depending on the identity of Jiti Chompee expressing through creative works.



Figure 1. The researcher (left) in rehearsal of *A Love Song* (2011)
Photo: Courtesy of Anoooch Petcharat

The show of *Demon in Venice* (2012): The motivation was taken from the literature of *Death in Venice* (1912) of Thomas Mann. Moreover, after studying the information about Thomas Mann, it has known that he has been; the homosexual. In the same way, Mann has the same method of presenting the outline that is, to write his own story and his loved ones. It is similar to Jean Ganet, but Mann can't express himself because the social condition at that time it is unusual for the old man to fall in love with the young man. Thus, they did not have sexual activity with his beloved ones nor being homosexual. Thus, the point is to play game with relationship and gender as the show says that; as the artist, he can't tell someone his gender as same as his homosexuality while the others may not be homosexual, except for viewing that gender is aesthetics and beauty. For example, it can view as; the male has the beauty from the anatomy (Chompee, 2016). Therefore, the motivation with the outline from the literature and the movie has become the significant component to reflect the picture for queer images and gender diversity.



Figure 2. The researcher (front) in the poster of *Demon in Venice* (2012)
Photo: Courtesy of Basil Childers

2) Dance Performers: The selection of the actors may not be from the audition only, but it may be from the real ones and then, they were invited to the show. Besides, these actors may gain any skill to perform with the suitability in the production. With this case, most of the actors should be expert in skills and talents with the good science to work. Then, it contributes in the good work with the devising performance process. Therefore, Jitti frequently used the male actor with aiding to gain more clearly line of dance for the team. In the same way, *Narai Avatara* (2003) of Naraphong Charassi is shown all male dancers in every character for demonstrating his queer identity and concept on stage (Tawalwongsri S and Charassi N, 2017: 202). What's more, Jitii Chompee says that "he really likes to work with the male dancer because he would like to create the team style, and sometimes he has viewed the male body as a beauty. On the other hand, if he needs to work with female, he needs them to have their strength in physical way; as the good image from the body characteristic and his own taste" (Chompee, 2016). In addition, the designing of Props and Costumes involves with the gender story, especially for several shows by Jitti; being developed with the comedy and sarcastic gender issue. Then, the male actors always wear dress suits, covers, skirts or high heels to make the conflict in the character attribution and the views as the female drag queen or in the excessive way.

3) Choreography: As for the designing of dancing in the first period; before setting up the team, it has applied mostly for the techniques of Modern Dance and Ballet. After that, it has combined with Thai classical dance because it is relative with Thai literature and then, selected the dancers from Fine Arts Department, Thailand. However, it isn't obvious that combining Thai dance with international contemporary dance is the absolute one or not. However, when there is opportunity, it must take the chance until becoming the successful in one level. Then, he will be invited to be the artists in residency for taking a look of the visual arts in several ways as well as gaining the sights to design the new choreography. Therefore, he can comprehend and applied the designed dance movement to adjust with other fields of arts increasingly. With this case, joining with other fields of arts with the show; can make it exciting and interesting for creating the queer images. Furthermore, frequently it must choose all of the male actors to act by designing the posture, especially for the duet dance. As the result, it can interpret to homosexuality with the designing of the dance posture; as the animal dancing to gain the strange image of the character different from the humans. With this

reason, the designing of dancing and the using of body in several shows by Jitti are depending on the movement in any part with joints. What's more, it should find the method that the actor turn back and then put the mask upside down on the back in order to see the body language of the dancers; to use some parts of their body in perfect way.

4) Site-Specific theatre space for working: According to the title of *A Love Song* (2011) and *Demon in Venice* (2012) it has seen obviously the creating of work to show as the Site-Specific performance. In addition, the show in the title of *A Love Song* (2011) has been setup at the woodshed named PT Gallery while the show in the title of *Demon in Venice* (2012) has gone well with the installation by applying the sand bag in the swimming pool. After that, the working as the Site-Specific performance has become unique to make the jobs in team, and sometimes Jitti has selected to act in the Gallery Studio near deserted building, deck, ladder, and harbor or even in the park. As the result, the presentation outside the theater can bring into the picture of queer images for the show.

Furthermore, now Jitti Chompee is still working in behalf of the organizer for Unfolding Kafka Festival. Besides, he has selected the show and arts in several styles involving with the literature of Franz Kafka. Similarly, it has emphasized on the body movement, visual art, installation and sculpture; especially, when the viewers or the artists in several fields have gained experiences by motivating themselves for the Unfolding Kafka Festival in 2017. Thus, it is different from the first time in A.D. 2015 so that it can increase the subject of gender in an obvious way. In the same way, Jitti Chompee has viewed it in the trend of the world culture, and according to the meeting of all members of the festival have agreed that this is one part of the theme of this festival because there are several stories of Kafka literature to reflect of gender issues. Thus, it can be interpreted in several views including of the bibliography of the marriage and the relationship of Kafka with abnormality. In this case, it is together with the literature of the *Metamorphosis* (1915) to modify himself to be the insect. What's more, Kafka story is involving with the gender condition and the abnormality of human-being as Jitti Chompee literature. For example, Kafka has not many unmarried boyfriends due to his homosexuality as well as not being brave to get married or unlike to have the sexual activity (Chompee, 2016). In this case, according to the learning of Kafka through the setting up of the festival by Jitti Chompee, it has viewed that Kafka has brought the weakness of his life's experiences to create a strong and an outstanding character. Moreover, there are several awkward animals; as the character of Kafka with the weakness in personality and the inferiority, the philosophy and the comparison of humanity. Therefore, it results in the queer images to the readers, (Chompee, 2016), and the characteristics of the animals have reflected of the gender issues. In summary, the instinct of gender issue is the basic subject of both animals and human-beings while the subject of queer images and the aspect of gender diversity is the unavoidable one to create the masterwork of Jitti Chompee.

CONCLUSION

According to the above information, the creative process from the show of the team of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre is directed by Jitti Chompee. Then, it has the presentation of queer images and the aspect of gender diversity such as Dance Plot, Dance Performers, Choreography and Site-Specific theatre space. Furthermore, Queer Images has brought to connect with the relationship of the three subjects; namely, 1) Individuality or identity of the creator 2) Guidelines for the use of gender symbolism 3) Reflecting gender diversity in contemporary Thai society through dance.

Moreover, the first issue is involving the identity and the individuality of the artist because the show nowadays has been setup by Chompee in behalf of the designer for the dancing. Thus, it should take much interest on the subject of homosexual and gender more than the past by bringing his interests; to be the motivation. For example, it should select the literature from the homosexual writers as Jean Genet or the literature of Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka to represent the homosexual view or the sexual views between human-beings and animals. Then, the selection of the motivation can reflect of the identity and the individuality of the artists. With this case, it can be seen obviously that the showing of gender issue in

different way might bring about for the queer images in the show. On the other hand, the subject of the motivation for the organizer can bring into the producing process and the designing of the dancing to think in pictures. What's more, the searching for symbols or the applying of equipment has represented or communicated with stories for the gender issues on the stage. Thus, it can express of the body language through gestures, movements, prop and costume for performance; to create the meanings and the scenes of the homosexuality on the stage. Therefore, the identity of Jitti Chompee has been showed through the signs of the show in multiply ways. In this case, the show of dancing for the team of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre can reflect of the learning views, the knowledge, the understanding and the new experience in the subject of the gender diversity through the social conditions in media through dancing.

In conclusion, this article is presenting about the queer images and gender diversity through the case study of 18 Monkeys Dance Theatre designed by Jitti Chompee. In the same way, this work is presented with the historical information of empirical dancing to the circle of performing arts, especially for the guidelines of performing in dance performance. What's more, in Thailand there is reflection of the view for queer images and gender diversity so that the artist can combine the science and the skills in expertness to contributes into the creating of work arts. Therefore, it can collect information and make analysis through the masterworks until gaining the knowledge and the creative guideline for performing arts in academic way in order to make the readers gain the information to study further.

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