Introduction

The small auditorium is hushed, no one moves, no one breathes as all eyes are intent upon the two figures on the bare raised platform, one of whom cradles the other. A moment before, the two elderly exiles from Ho Chi Minh City had been singing and romping at their first experience of snow, when suddenly the *cai luong* performer slumped into the arms of his friend. For two hours they had been entertaining the spectators with songs, witticisms, memories, and foibles as they resurrected old rivalries and struggled to come to grips with their new life in the United States. The HCM City audience now can see neither of their faces; their bodies formerly so buoyant are now heavy with sadness, but the moment of death is signaled only by the slightest tremor of tension in the arm that holds the other. A few moments later, the Vietnamese play *Da co hoai lang* (Hearing Night Drums, Longing for My Husband, 1997) ends, but for a full minute there is no applause as the audience is still caught in its spell, unwilling to let what was so present and alive slip back into memory.

Live theatre not only exists in the “here and now” of a performance but, by presenting mimetic actions to an audience as though they were happening at that very moment, “the dramatic creates an eternal present,” as Martin Esslin suggests. Theatre always exists in the context of the present, conditioned by both the culture that creates it and the one that receives it. Thus, “contemporary” could include all the theatrical performances happening now (in any given “now”); even the most ancient theatre forms when performed for contemporary audiences, regardless of claims to authenticity, are contemporary by virtue of the fact that their significance and meaning emerges from the minds of living performers and spectators.

“Contemporary” in this book covers a wide range of performance territory over a period of fifteen years (1994–2010). Most of Southeast Asia’s secular theatres operate at the intersections of tradition, modernity, and contemporaneity. A wide variety of traditional forms still exist, often supported by state
institutions, but court, ritual, and agrarian-based theatres have diminished in influence along with the political and economic systems that supported them. The urban hybrid theatres of the early twentieth century, which integrated aspects of Western drama and once signified the epitome of modernity, now evoke nostalgia when their elderly practitioners sing the popular songs of yesterday, or highlight a generational disconnect when taught as historical artifacts to college students, their risqué elements eliminated. Live theatre companies focusing on contemporary life function on the margins of societies infatuated with electronically generated entertainment. Most Southeast Asian theatres, whether traditional, modern, or contemporary, even those that have played a central role in their cultures’ well-being and self-definition, exist on the periphery, constantly forced to reinvent their own raison d’etre.

**Traditional Performance**

The traditional theatres, though no longer so essential to appeasing the gods, reflecting royal power, and providing communal entertainment, are still a touchstone of cultural identity. This is true for the new nation-states that have adopted them, the rural communities that have been slow to abandon them, and the cosmopolitan dramatists plumbing local roots alike. Theatre termed traditional or “premodern” (usually meaning “precolonial”) is the theatre considered authentic to the peoples of Southeast Asia before European intervention. Though greatly influenced by movement across each other’s current borders and by the cultures of larger Asian neighbors such as China and India, the so-called indigenous performing arts are determined by the dominant ethnic group in each country. Spanning a broad spectrum from classical court dance-dramas and folk dramas to ritual and trance performances, they are recognized by both the region’s inhabitants and outsiders as representative of Southeast Asian cultures.

Originally staged mostly at celebrations—official, religious, or private—and sponsored so that the public attended free, traditional theatre had an intimate relationship with its own community, which created, supported, and watched it. The performances, while transmitting narratives that instilled spiritual and moral values, were also outlets for communal feelings against injustice, expressed by stylized laments or comic duos who, as mediators between the common people, rulers, and gods, satirized contemporary conditions. Upholding the ethos established by the dominant religions in the region—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and later Christianity, in conjunction with local animist beliefs—the performances reconfirmed moral norms by critiquing
their transgression and abuses of power. Traditional theatre offered temporary catharsis as well as transcendent comfort by enacting conflicts and then providing either appropriate punishments or miraculous reconciliations that reflected a just and stable cosmic order.

Performances generally occurred on the ground or on temporary wood and bamboo stages. They were linked to high points in the religious calendar even when not specifically sacred; their significance lay not only in the excellence of the presentation, but in being special, rare events. Since written records of such performances were either nonexistent or destroyed by pillaging armies, traditional music, dance, and drama existed primarily in the minds and bodies of the performers who passed down their skills to each generation. Historical changes in the region's performing arts thus remain obscure prior to the nineteenth century.

“Traditional” in Southeast Asian theatre once implied a method of learning as well as a type of performance, A student did not merely learn skills and techniques from a teacher but also imbibed the ethos and world view of the culture, which Clifford Geertz defined thus:

the moral (and aesthetic) aspects of a given culture, the evaluative elements, have commonly been summed up in the term “ethos,” while the cognitive, existential aspects have been designated by the term “world view.” A people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood: it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.2

Order is established when ethos and world view are perceived as being harmoniously balanced and integrated. The traditional actor was an embodiment of both—his or her narrative expressed the world view that included one's proper relationships to nature, society, and god, while the performance style aesthetically expressed the ethos, the proper emotions, and moods. Ideally, traditional theatre was an organic expression of a community: both the presentation and the audience's perception of it reinforced the values of the entire community. The plays instructed by expounding ideals epitomized in culture heroes; performance maintained continuity with the past through the retelling of myths and historical legends, rectifying aberrations in the cosmos through their reenactment of symbolic struggles.
This transmission of world view from master to pupil was interrupted by the imposition of colonialism’s foreign aesthetic criteria, and later further attenuated by World War II and Cold War upheavals in Southeast Asia. The establishment of state institutions to teach the traditional arts has preserved them, but also altered their function in the society at large. While students learn technique, they have lost the meaning of the dance movements, the symbolism in song lyrics, the connotations of a melody, or the religious/philosophical significance of a narrative. Society too has become less informed and therefore less concerned about such profundities because they no longer reflect daily life. Knowing less themselves, audiences demand less from performers. The disjunction is even greater when it is performed for outsiders, tourists with no knowledge at all. Lacking the sense of integrated form and meaning, the reprising of traditional performance for uninformed tourists has contributed to eviscerating the tradition, leaving the shell without the meat. Anthony Tatlow enumerates the perils:

The forms of East Asian theatre are in danger of marginalization within their own cultures by rapid social change. Either they can reproduce themselves as theme parks of the cultural past, partly financed by tourism, or they remain an esoteric preserve for a relatively small group of devotees sustained perhaps by a backward- and inward-looking traditionalism, or they risk self-destruction in attempting to adapt to an externally originating modernity that threatens the ethos of their existence.3

In the twenty-first century it is the occasion for traditional theatre that is rarer than the performances themselves, which are staged at official functions and tourist venues. Governments have taken over former court sponsorship to promote and protect “traditional performance” as a single homogenous immutable national heritage. Tourist performances range from nightly short dinner shows to full-scale stagings at historic sites such as the Vietnamese court of Hue.

A sense of tradition also exists deeply embedded in every individual’s mind, formed by their own first encounters with a type of theatre that established his/her standard of true and authentic presentation. Thus the criteria of what constitutes “traditional” are usually shared by people of the same generation. Though the traditional arts continue to evolve—as they have always done—when they appear to change less in response to artistic necessity and more from foreign or commercial forces, the changes are seen by such spectators not as legitimate innovations but as bastardizations.
Though traditional theatres have lost ground from “habitat destruction,” and the communities that created them out of internal necessity have disappeared or found other types of performative expression, governments have sustained their transmission to some degree, and tourism does provide jobs for many performers. Traditional music, dance movements, and dramatic narratives have also increasingly become source material for contemporary theatre practitioners who experiment with styles and stories, but they do not necessarily know how those parts were formerly integrated. There is often friction between those who want to preserve and protect, and those who want to use their contemporary interpretations to revitalize this cultural inheritance.

**THE “MODERN” IN HYBRID THEATRES AND SPOKEN DRAMA**

In Europe, modernity evolved internally from religious and political revolutions, scientific discoveries, technological inventions, and global empire-building. In Southeast Asia, modernity was largely imposed by European administrations with little regard for indigenous systems. When foreign theatre became identified with “modern,” indigenous theatre became “traditional,” each defined in contrast with the other.

The new theatrical styles, content, and stage technologies introduced by nineteenth-century European colonization affected the indigenous theatre in three basic ways: traditional theatres attempted to incorporate trends in foreign aesthetics and stage technology even when they went against their own core characteristics; hybrid theatres arose in new colonial centers that adapted foreign narratives and included the popular songs and dances of the day that were themselves hybrid creations; and the development of a new genre, serious spoken drama, was used to address current social and political issues. All three types of theatre evolved their unique hybrid styles of acting that fused and yoked disparate techniques to represent the similar clashes and adaptations occurring in the new reality beyond the theatre.

Modernity in Southeast Asia was, and despite almost two hundred years of assimilation sometimes still is, conceived of as “Western.” All performance genres were altered to varying degrees, depending upon the priorities of each colonizing power and the degree of compliance and resistance shown by each local society. Traditional divisions of labor and hierarchies of authority began to break down with the diminution of the courts, importation of foreign labor, the establishment of a civil service, and the emergence of new comprador classes that served as middlemen between the European merchants and local producers. Ethnic delineations, codified by census-taking, erected barriers
between people of different skin color, ethnicity, language, religion, and caste in a region accustomed to a mutually beneficial flux and flow. While the people of Southeast Asia had long suffered the tyranny of internecine warfare fought by their own rulers, the presence of foreigners who not only materially oppressed them but deprived them of the primacy of their own world view set in motion the drive for self-determination.

Ideas of what constituted modernity as well as the levels of its penetration varied to a great degree throughout the societies. For the majority, it was known by its outer manifestations, while an elite group educated in foreign institutions experienced deeper psychological schisms. The theatre reflected both the superficial imitations of European fashion and manners as well as conflicts in values, and it whetted its satirical edge by exposing the hypocrisy that resulted from the discrepancies. Though women were increasingly active in theatre, the plays often critiqued the impact of modern values on traditional concepts of femininity.

The colonial period saw the establishment of the commercial theatre. Performers formerly supported by court patronage now had to seek a living by entertaining the mercantile class. Performances previously offered freely to the public on outdoor stages now had to be paid for and often took place inside semipermanent structures. Moreover, the proscenium arch was introduced that both framed the action and attempted to erect a fourth wall between the spectators and performers who had previously inhabited the same imaginative space. Tickets segregated the once-unified public into spectators who chose to attend and those who either could not afford to or did not want to be involved. Ticket purchasing also altered the audience’s expectation. When people could come and go as they pleased, they tolerated a wide range of entertainments, but once they paid for a performance and were expected to stay for the duration, they desired something that held their attention throughout. They wanted their money’s worth.

Only a few Southeast Asians actually saw the various types of Western theatre performed by either the troupes that traveled from Europe or by foreign residents for their own entertainment. The traveling shows typically performed popular contemporary musicals, pantomimes, and comedies, while Western classical texts were taught in mission schools. Thus there was often a schism between the literary study of Western drama in schools and its development on the professional stage.

The early twentieth-century hybrid theatres represent the first example of mass popular culture in Southeast Asian performing arts. Adapting stories from
all over the world to provide fantasy realms—the Asian converse of European Orientalism—hybrid theatres emerged in response to the greater leisure and prosperity among the urban middle class desiring entertainment reflecting their status and fitting their schedules. It “opened its doors at pre-announced times, charged fees and was largely divorced from the rhythms of the life cycle or the agricultural seasons.” It relieved the twin modern diseases of “stress” and “boredom” and appealed across an ethnic spectrum, attracting members from all classes and communities by performing in the main vernacular language.

Unlike the traditional theatres, the hybrid theatres were not constrained by either rigid rules or stylistic refinements, nor were they committed to preservation and continuation, rather the opposite. They offered novelty—the latest trend at the height of its public interest, moving on to something else when it no longer aroused curiosity or enthusiasm. Hybrid performances did not show the same fidelity to a written text that came to characterize modern spoken drama; their skeletal scripts required improvisation and allowed for comic digressions. Adopting what they could afford of Western stage technology, the hybrid theatres’ use of startling stage effects became their key exotic feature, and thus they initially shared a symbiotic relationship with the other medium representing modernity—film. The hybrid theatre borrowed stories from movies and novels—a new literary form in several Southeast Asian societies—and actors left the stage to work in film. The appeal of both was their modernity; unburdened by traditional affiliations, they embraced all sectors of society and were affordable by most people. Whereas traditional theatres offered stability, the commercial theatres not only gratified but stimulated an appetite for novelty, making audiences less satisfied with the status quo and constantly craving something new, thus introducing consumable and disposable rather than enduring theatre.

After the hiatus created by World War II, many hybrid theatres blossomed again during the first euphoric days of national independence, but have since faded. Some have been resurrected by national governments as a form of “traditional” theatre. Those operating in a purely commercial environment rely on their absorption of popular music and dance to survive. The hybrid theatres exist today primarily for the poorer sectors of Southeast Asian society or among older people who remember their heyday.

In some countries spoken drama rose to prominence with the demise of the hybrid theatres; in other places they emerged more or less in tandem, concurrently playing to different audiences and serving different cultural purposes. Intellectuals were drawn to the potential of spoken drama as a platform
to instigate social and political change. Spoken drama, written in vernacular prose by an individual playwright, was a new genre in Southeast Asia where theatrical narrative was generally expansive, including song and dance and long portions of verse in a classical language. While some of the traditional theatres had famous playwrights, some of whose scripts survive, the rise of modern spoken drama was the first time in which the playwright assumed a dominant role. In contrast to the ephemeral hybrid theatres, spoken drama aspired to the stature of a respected literary genre. Initially, message overwhelmed the poorly constructed plots, but the playwrights gradually strove to find a balance to improve the drama’s artistic merit.

The modern spoken dramas also differed from both the hybrid theatres, which lasted all night, and traditional performances, which could go on for weeks, in that they lasted only a few hours. Playwrights adopted the concise structure of the European “well-made play” and created intensity by compressing the plot into a short period and introducing surprising revelations that reversed the action. This then required a different kind of attention from the audience, which needed to hear every line and follow the story closely in order to understand the final outcome.

Much of the initiative to produce didactic spoken dramas came through educational institutions. Students and teachers of foreign literature read and translated texts and often were spoken drama’s first performers. Initially performed by these amateurs to a small elite, spoken drama developed as the writers became more skilled in its scripting and actors grew freer to experiment with realistic rather than stylized gesture.

The transition from a colonial theatre performed by and for Europeans to a new local theatre performed by and for Southeast Asians differed from country to country. Moving away from translations and imitations of Western dramas to staging original scripts, the acting styles still tended to be based on the stylized features of traditional theatre. Each culture’s stage realism developed as an idiosyncratic hybrid of naturalistic acting infused with stylized cultural geste. These local “realisms” led Western observers of the time to consider Asian modern drama as a quaint parody of their own, but precisely because of the variety of perceptions and presentations of realism, these modern dramas challenge the notion of any universal realism and demonstrate that Western stage realism is as culturally determined as any other.

Expressing a level of seriousness new to the stage, Southeast Asian spoken dramas primarily addressed issues of national independence in the first half of the twentieth century, and then turned to social critique after independence.
Espousing anticolonial sentiments, they helped create a new sense of national identity among people who were formerly bound by smaller communal ties. After independence, however, dramatists had to navigate carefully because the governments of the new nations were fragile and sensitive. Spoken dramas could attack corruption and hypocrisy, but had to avoid making references that were too direct or too specific; they could mock superstition and gullibility, but could not ridicule religion; they could attack greed, but imply nothing detrimental to trade or consumption. They pushed the boundaries of acceptable social behavior and included incipient advocacy for the rights of youth and women. They critiqued both the reactionary values of the feudal hierarchies that obstructed progress and the modern progressive attitudes that threatened fundamental cultural norms.

Since spoken drama turned its focus to failings inside the new states, their governments were as suspicious of it as the former colonial administrations. Spoken in contemporary languages, costumed in contemporary dress, and staged in a contemporary realistic mise-en-scène, its critique was evident regardless of the evasive tactics employed to protect the performers and playwrights. The Cold War’s ideological power struggles affected spoken drama. Capitalist governments tended to support the traditional theatre whose authoritarian values they appropriated to bolster their legitimacy, while socialist governments favored modern spoken drama, which they transformed into dramas of socialist realism.

Unlike the court dance-dramas, none of the Southeast Asian modern theatres had any impact on Western theatre, primarily because they were seen as indigenous adaptations of the latter. In most countries, however, they played a pivotal role in educating both the elite and the masses, uniting them in the drive toward independence. Modern plays were catalysts for social change and reflections of modernity among the Southeast Asian public. As early incarnations of “intercultural theatre,” they often dramatize “difference” in a more complex and uncompromising manner than many of the later twentieth-century intercultural experiments. Their dependence on verbal communication in local languages and their highly specific cultural references, however, will most likely continue to limit their significance to their geographical origins.

**Contemporary Theatre as a Post—Cold War Phenomenon**

The contemporary trends in theatre are further ramifications of the splintering that began with modern theatre’s attack on the outmoded forms and authoritarian values implicit in traditional performance. But Southeast Asian theatres
are making use of both modern and traditional theatres, sometimes critiquing their values, and in other cases resurrecting their values as a form of resistance against the new encroachments of globalization. The earlier theatres are often pertinent subtexts in contemporary performances that therefore require an audience's prior knowledge. Thus, despite contemporary works appearing to conform to international styles, standards, and theories, they are often still tied to their local sources for their greatest impact, if not their largest audiences.

Contemporary Southeast Asian theatres’ emergence is harder to locate because their contemporary characteristics appear unevenly across the region and even within each country. It is a post–Cold War phenomenon, a result, in part, of the American, Russian, and Chinese military involvement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; the presence of US servicemen in Thailand and the Philippines, the anticommunist purges in Malaysia and Indonesia, the socialist isolation of Burma/Myanmar, and the secession of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia. The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s allowed for a smoother dominance of global capitalism that is largely responsible for the twenty-first-century prosperity of the region’s middle classes, as well the widespread poverty of its disenfranchised populations.

With the demise of communism as a cohesive ideology, it is tempting to see the antiauthoritarian stance of many contemporary theatres as the residual expression of a Marxist critique. Contemporary theatre, however, rarely espouses a clear ideological alternative to national or global narratives, and instead critiques the general malfunctioning of government and social structures. Whether operating in socialist or capitalist systems, the stage satirizes insensitive and greedy materialism, government corruption, restrictions on personal freedoms, ethnic strife, population displacements, poverty, environmental destruction, blind imitation of the West, and, in general, the imposition of global economic demands on local communities.

Censorship of scripts and performances remains severe throughout the region even though live theatre no longer plays a central role in cultural life. Rather than as a prime mover of social consciousness, the theatre's political raison d'être has become to act as a small but persistent gadfly to official power. While still primarily a group phenomenon and more socially engaged than most theatres in the West, Southeast Asian urban theatre is increasingly an opportunity for individual creative expression.

When Western theatrical realism first entered Southeast Asia, it did not emphasize what Ibsen himself so adamantly advocated: the inviolable rights of the individual. Such sentiments have emerged more in the post–Cold War
theatre with the increasing prosperity of the urban bourgeoisie that has been affected by Western-style education and the luxury to pursue artistic self-expression. Though twentieth-century theatre often adopted an oppositional stance to mainstream nationalist discourse, contemporary theatre’s real subversive potential is as a platform for individualism. And thus censorship keeps an unblinking eye on it as its celebration of individual creativity can be suspect in conformist societies and a threat to authoritarian regimes.

The theatre continues to reflect the two towering abstractions that Geertz called “The Indigenous Way of Life” (essentialism) and “The Spirit of the Age” (epochalism). The first “is to look to local mores, established institutions, and the unities of common experience—to ‘tradition,’ ‘culture,’ ‘national character,’ or even ‘race’—for the roots of a new identity.” The second “is to look for the general outlines of the history of our time, and in particular to what one takes to be the overall direction and significance of that history,” that is, to embrace the current configuration of modernity:

The tension between these two impulses—to move with the tide of the present and to hold to an inherited course—gives new state nationalism its peculiar air of being at once hell-bent toward modernity and morally outraged by its manifestations. There is a certain irrationality in this. But it is more than a collective derangement; it is a social cataclysm in the process of happening.

Although the two strains are visible in contemporary theatre, a fluid synthetic local modernity is emerging in the younger generation who accept with increasing alacrity a multifaceted reality in which the origins of ideas and images are less important than the timeliness of their global popularity—and they can be adopted, adapted, and jettisoned expediently. Governments, on the other hand, tend to alternately emphasize first one impulse and then the other, while at the same time reprocessing the contradictions to create an appropriately unified and indigenous image of “Asian modernity.” Southeast Asian governments have responded to the unwanted social effects of globalization with “Asian values,” the conservative social philosophy that counters the free flow of liberal capitalism with familiar authoritarian constraints and inhibits the attractions of individualism with the reassertion of a citizen’s primary duties to family, community, and nation.

Contemporary theatres try to come to grips with how the two impulses are inextricably intertwined in daily life without subscribing to the governments’
Multilevel consciousness has become the new world view, particularly of those living in the rapidly growing metropolises. It would be tempting to say that governments aim for globalization in business and economic development, and localization in theatre and the arts. Some strive to maintain this kind of separation, or to have the latter serve the former. There is often evident friction between the roles governments set for the arts and those which artists set for themselves. But if the arts are to remain vital in their societies they cannot be kept separate or indentured.

One common trait among the region’s often bi- and trilingual middle classes is their ability to express themselves in English. Since most contemporary theatre practitioners come from this group, the theatre itself possesses a cosmopolitan urbanity that simultaneously and self-consciously exploits and disguises its local roots. Southeast Asian contemporary theatres often employ the same techniques as Western experimental theatres but their narratives reflect local manifestations of global impact both to distinguish them artistically on international stages and to appeal more intimately to local audiences. They demonstrate an awareness about how they stand in relation to not only other types of live local performance, but also the mass media, foreign theatre trends, and the nebulous standards of being “world class.” This sense of positioning means that their perceptions of themselves and their work are no longer solely determined by their local audience, even if they never actually perform for any other.

After independence, new governments supported indigenous classical arts not only to reinforce the legitimacy of the new nation-state within the framework of their predecessors, but also to counteract the critique of modern and contemporary theatres as being overly influenced by inappropriate foreign values. Creating national institutions to teach the palace arts was therefore strategic internally, but it also played to the orientalist expectations of foreigners as the dance-dramas were increasingly performed for tourists and the troupes sent as cultural ambassadors abroad. Contemporary performers, in contrast, found support from foreign granting agencies—the Japan Foundation, the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations of the United States, the Prince Claus Fund of the Netherlands, the Heinrich Böll and Goethe Foundations of Germany, and the British Council and Alliance Française as well as Scandinavian embassies—which helped them travel, attend workshops, and collaborate with dramatists from other countries. Though beneficial to the growth and development of individual performers and to the global recognition of their art, this outside support has sometimes created, or sustained, a schism between
the performer and his or her own society, especially when it has encouraged an idiosyncratic personal style that has little resonance within the performer's own culture.

**Twenty-first-Century Theatre: Four Prevailing Types**

While much of the performance in Southeast Asian capitals has evolved from the earlier modern theatres in the form of situational comedies, historical dramas, musicals, and social melodramas, contemporary theatre can be divided into four interrelated and overlapping areas: postmodern theatre, postcolonial theatre, intercultural theatre, and social action theatre.

**Postmodern theatre**

Challenging both the forms and content of traditional and modern theatres, subverting them to new purposes as well as advocating “performative” rather than “dramatic” qualities, postmodern theatre includes experimental productions, performance art, and fragmented or radical revisions of earlier texts and performances. Southeast Asian postmodern theatre is often marked by a distinct self-consciousness that occurs principally from the performer not only acting and interpreting, but also self-observing—not from the impersonal position of the highly trained traditional performer, but with an extrinsic theorizing gaze. This performance contains its own theorization within its creative parameters, which may be due to its uncertainty over audience reception and understanding.

Often combining visual and dramatic elements, postmodern theatre is typically more affiliated with global trends than local developments. It employs an aesthetic of flattening hierarchal cultural values found in the traditional, classical, and folk arts, and radically juxtaposes their images and concepts in ways that can be meaningful to those who know the original contexts. The postmodern performance transgresses previous theatre conventions, discredits the linear modern narrative, and often foregoes the need for a text altogether. Instead, its content and style is highly bound to the particular performer or a specific production and therefore usually resists repeatability by another performer or group.

It embraces mass popular culture, creating a vast pluralism of images and ideas, both foreign and indigenous, without necessarily contextualizing, prioritizing, or judging them. Western images and ideas are, by their nature, already decontextualized, unmoored from their source, and can be recontextualized at will. Decontextualizing local images and symbols creates more controversy
because destabilizing their significance further erodes local cultures already under siege from the impacts of globalization.

Over the past three decades, Southeast Asian postmodern theatre has emerged from an elite group—similar to that which formerly promoted modern theatre—those with a middle-class background and a university education. They therefore know how to appropriately apply the ironic quotations to mass media culture—that is, how to enjoy it in the theoretically “correct” way. Plying foreign icons to local audiences and native symbols to spectators abroad, postmodern performers are often seen as “eccentric/Western” in their home countries, and “exotic/Asian” in the West. This duality can serve to intrigue audiences, especially young people, because it plays with notions of identity. Postmodern performance appears not to obey any rules, nor be bound by institutional norms, and is therefore perceived, and appreciated, as untrammeled individual creativity.

Postmodern performance rejects both the realism and patriotism of the modern theatre and the moral certainties of traditional theatre, even as it makes use of them. In part, postmodern performance has been the result of, and the response to, the extensive penetration of television and the Internet. Southeast Asian television features popular melodrama serials that are an amalgam of hybrid theatre and spoken drama plots. Postmodern performances make references to these plots and their characters to create a live link with popular culture. But it is mostly television’s disruption of the narrative by advertising, and the aesthetic of the commercials themselves, juxtaposing disparate and striking images to make exaggerated connections between desire and the product on offer, that has most influenced its style. Advertising fragments and splices text and context. Postmodern performance, like advertisements, trawls global material culture and then blurs the iconography of commerce, nation, and culture to make striking images of its own. The postmodern aesthetic may reflect the powerful influence of the mass media, but its aims are also to puncture, or at least bracket, this commercial status quo. The postmodern theatre is predicated on oblique critique, for although it exploits the subversive potential of shared spontaneous apprehension between performer and spectator, it also acknowledges their mutual complicity as consumers of global culture.

At the Annexe in Kuala Lumpur’s Central Market, Pink (2007) was performed by the Taro Dance Theatre, whose members had trained in Japanese butoh, the world’s only transnational contemporary dance technique of Asian origin. The performance explored all the cosmopolitan and local connotations of pink: “it is most little girls’ favourite colour, a typical colour in sweets,
the choice tie colour among BBC male broadcasters and even in the British Parliament.” Thus “pink” was explored in a multivalent and playful manner suggesting both its ultra feminine as well as masculine qualities, but how and where? In Southeast Asia or the Southeast Asian view of Britain, or a combination of both? The reference to “little girls” was culturally nonspecific, but the popularity of pink clothes and accessories in Asia is probably a fairly recent Western importation via Japanese icons such as “Hello Kitty.” Vibrantly pink sweets, however, are not common in Britain but are typical in Southeast Asia. Did the reference to British men’s apparel from performers in the former British colony insinuate effeminacy? Power or faux power?

In the opening scene, the five performers lay on their backs in a circle with their bare legs raised and used their feet to pass around a blond Barbie doll dressed in a Chinese *cheongsam*. Was touching the doll with the feet—the unclean part of the body in Southeast Asia—significant? Was one to infer from the doll’s blonde hair, the imposition (and rejection?) of Western standards of beauty, and if so, then what to make of her Chinese costume? Is the doll an innocuous fantasy or a conspiracy to instill self-doubt in dark-haired Asian girls? Yet, despite all the questionable symbolism, there was something tender and beautiful about the way the feet gently grasped the doll so that it never faltered or fell, the white legs waving like sea anemone to the serene music. Did its unusual beauty undermine its social critique? Was it social critique or a random perusal of the endless ramifications of meaning?

By participating in international festivals and performing in other countries, Southeast Asian postmodern performers belong as much, if not more, to an international circle of artists rather than rooted in their original locale. That the postmodern figure is often represented in transit is another characteristic of both the new mobility afforded by air travel as well as the sense of displacement caused by the rapid pace of development over the past three decades.

**Postcolonial theatre**

The region’s postcolonial theatres resemble and share many of the eclectic techniques and styles of the postmodern theatre and likewise critique the modern theatre’s values of nationalism and progress, but they tend to be less playful toward commercial icons and take a more unequivocal antiglobalization stance. An overtly political theatre, it sees indigenous values and self-sufficiency being undermined by the neocolonial collaboration of local governments and foreign corporations. Postcolonial theatre aims to increase public awareness about the causes and effects behind the current forms of exploitation.
Southeast Asian postcolonial playwrights and theatres, on the one hand, reach back into colonial history to investigate the roots of economic inequities, political authoritarianism, and religious and ethnic tensions, finding material with which to critique both foreign and native administrations. On the other hand, they look outward at the external forces that seem to control every aspect of contemporary life. Playwrights sometimes set their stories in the colonial era to avoid censorship, and thus negative representations of colonial authorities are often to be read as critiques of current officialdom. Because of its global economic and media dominance at the end of the twentieth century, the United States was the undisputed stage villain in Southeast Asian postcolonial theatre, replacing the earlier oppression by European colonizers.

Makhampom, a Thai theatre group founded in 1981, creates experimental works by combining techniques from classical dance and folk theatre to raise awareness about social problems. Its *Daeng between Two Worlds* (1993) showed the negative impact of American Cold War largesse on the Thai countryside. Performed in a broad agitprop style, incorporating Thai folk dance, folk songs, and mime, it had little spoken dialogue in order to be understood on tour in Germany, England, and Scotland. Focusing on the tale of a country girl, it began with the idyllic view of indigenous rural life: innocent childhood games, bird-song, and the chime of the Buddhist prayer bell. An Uncle Sam figure entered, jingling money and enticed her family to move to the city. Taking up work in a factory, the impressionable girl imitated the fashions and behavior of hip urban youth. After she accepted money for clothes by a pimp in white mask and an eighteenth-century European wig, she was raped and put on the market with a “for sale” sign around her neck.

Though showing Daeng as a victim of poverty, ignorance, and seduction, the play’s simplistic duality—between rural idyll and urban evil, Thai purity and foreign corruption—dealt with neither the very real hardships of rural life nor the levels of collusion within Thai society, nor the fact that by inculcating feminine virtues of obedience, innocence, and compliance, traditional society makes country girls particularly vulnerable to such abuses. Moreover, the tale was not generated from the exploited women themselves, but contrived from the perspective of sympathetic educated Bangkok youth who had in fact benefited from their country’s capitalist development. Though recognizing the unjust price paid by other members of Thai society, the company packaged its protest for the edification of European audiences rather than the enlightenment of Daeng herself.

Although Southeast Asian theatre’s construction of globalization primarily refers to the West, more productions are examining the role and economic
impact of China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, both within the poorer Southeast Asian countries as well as in terms of the fates of their migrant workers in North Asia. Several dramas have also revisited the period of the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia. The representations of Japan (ranging from twentieth-century oppressor to twenty-first-century investment partner) and the North-South economic divide demonstrate the historical and geographical scope of postcolonial interactions depicted on stage.

Intercultural theatre

While it might be possible to construe all borrowings and fusions between theatres of different cultures as “intercultural,” the term “interculturalism” here refers primarily to the combination of Western texts such as Greek or Shakespearean tragedies with Southeast Asian classical dance-drama forms. Moreover, in contrast with postmodern performance, which appropriates pop culture and the commercial world of mass media, intercultural theatre is affiliated with national and classical “high culture.” Intercultural theatre could be called more accurately “inter-classical” theatre. And because the large spectacles involve texts and arts associated with national identity, they have caused controversy over questions of cultural appropriation and the right of representation. They challenge a country’s ability to manage its own cultural representation, and because they tend to essentialize present-day cultures through their traditional forms, they raise the specter of misrepresentation—not only of their collaborating partner but also of themselves.

The use of a single classical performing art to represent a whole culture that is not only pluralistic but also a modern vital society is a complex misrepresentation. Likewise, the West is often represented by a single text chosen for its status within the Western literary canon. The hope is that status will be conferred on the production even when it performs the text with little regard for the reasons that gave it status in the first place. Thus the productions not only essentialize Southeast Asian theatres, but they also expose Asian cultural assumptions that ignore Western cultural diversity and history, reducing plays to monolithic meanings. Status is also important because such productions are often expensive and when the enterprise is given “the largest budget ever for a stage production” by a ministry of culture, the national reputation is at stake.

Despite the use of Western texts, the impetus for intercultural experimentation in Southeast Asia often comes from Japan. In 1995 Yukio Ninagawa’s production of Medea toured Southeast Asia, making a profound impact on Southeast Asian dramatists and spectators alike. Its “brash conceptual
frameworks, an expansive stage bathed in colour and light, operatic performances of inspiring precision, imagistic splendor, rich Oriental imagery, a superb orchestration of expansive casts . . . ,” so impressed Malaysian film director U-Wei Haji Saari that when he was offered the opportunity in 1997 to direct a stage play sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism, he chose Bakai (The Bacchae).

The production was given a large budget that allowed him to cast well-known actors and employ a good deal of stage machinery—from pneumatic lifts creating an earthquake by breaking apart the stage into rising and falling fragments to an enormous fire-breathing dragon entering the final scene with the Dionysus character on its back. Thus the attractive exoticism of the performance was not only from the foreign and unknown “famous” text, but from the heretofore unseen technical effects on the Malaysian stage. Saari, like Ninagawa, opted for a vaguely oriental and exotic mise-en-scène that represented no particular culture: “I am aiming for almost a non-place, non-time, even though we pay homage to Greek style and clothing, and also to Nusantara [the Indonesian archipelago] music and architecture.” Like the Japanese

Adlin Aman Ramlie as the Dionysus figure in U-Wei Haji Saari’s Bakai, the Malay adaptation of The Bacchae in Kuala Lumpur in 1997. Photo: Catherine Diamond.
Medea, it was neither Greek nor Asian, but situated in an oriental imaginary existing on the stage alone.

Despite the intention of the director and the Ministry to create a prestigious performance, Bacchae was a contentious choice in Malaysia. The plot, which centers on Pentheus being punished for not acknowledging Dionysus as a true deity, ran into problems with officials in the Ministry and almost every aspect of the play had to be compromised to allow the production to proceed. The authorities insisted that because Islam is the state religion and accepts the existence of no god but Allah, Dionysus had to be recast as a demigod, a move that undermined the central point of the play. But whether god or demigod, Dionysus is in every way an anathema to orthodox Muslims: his sexual ambiguity, his rule by wine and intoxication, his realm of the irrational—and hence of drama itself. Having to avoid these pitfalls and at the same time come up with a justification for Dionysus's victory over Pentheus, filmmaker Amir Muhammad, who translated and adapted the script, made Dionysus represent “nature,” which required respect or would exact horrible revenge, though this interpretation was not particularly evident in the production. Since the original text was generally unknown to the Malaysian spectators, the compromised presentation, a fascinating “misrepresentation,” made virtually no sense.

Social action theatre

Social action theatres share a world view similar to that of the postcolonial theatres, but their performance is usually less about plumbing the causes of problems and more about making specific improvements among urban slum-dwellers, the rural poor, and ethnic minorities. A theatre of protest, it also serves to educate and empower, often including the participation of local communities. It is usually sponsored by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Despite the growing middle class in most Southeast Asian towns and cities, and ostensible democratic voting rights, there is still a large mental divide between “the big people” who control and “the little people” who are controlled. Southeast Asian citizens, in the main, favor security and stability over personal freedoms; the social order in which their niche is guaranteed is understood as the necessary prelude to prosperity.

In the vacuum left by governments’ failure to address poverty, with its concomitant lacks in health, education, and social welfare, a new kind of “people power” has coalesced in the formation of local NGOs that became well-established entities in the 1990s and use theatre as a form of public outreach. Whereas the traditional theatre inculcated a largely illiterate populace with
proper modes of behavior based on obedience to authority, and the modern theatre exhorted the populace to rebel against foreign oppression, current social action theatre aids impoverished communities, for instance, by informing them how better to survive the impacts of globalization. They speak to people who are left out of formal educational institutions and who have been taught to accept their own subjugation through religion, custom, or current politics. Like postcolonial theatre, social action theatre is the residual expression of a leftist idealism that in the twenty-first century is no longer able to promote systemic changes from the top and hence strives to empower marginalized communities to manage their own affairs more effectively.

Theatres of social action generally fall into two camps: either the troupes themselves double as NGOs, deciding which problems to address and what kinds of performances to produce, or they are companies trained in a particular genre such as puppetry that are commissioned by international NGOs (for instance, UNICEF or the Red Cross) to create performances pertinent to the area of concern. Thailand's Maya (Illusion), founded in 1981 by Santi Chitrachinda and Somsak Kanha, is one of the most imaginative and active of socially committed theatres. It focuses on empowering thousands of underprivileged children in the Bangkok slums and poor rural areas, and turns the tables on authority figures by creating dramas that allow children to present their points of view to parents and teachers.

Its Gang Yok Mek (The Exaggeration Gang, 1993) combated the influence of television advertising by using humor, imaginative use of familiar objects, and audience participation to help children resist the clever tactics urging them to buy sugary snacks. A child of indeterminate sex named Kao, carrying a piggy bank, tries for a second time to make the journey to the Land of Advanced Children after having been tricked into breaking the bank by the gang. Passing through Candy Land, Kao is enticed to spend money on sweets, escaping only with the help of the audience, which chants the spell, “Stop and think” and “Stay aware.” Kao almost succumbs when the snacks offer collectible stickers that children can exchange and play games with. The script deliberately did not lecture, but let the children decide for themselves.\textsuperscript{12} Initially performed in the early 1990s, Chitrachinda and Kanha pursued their protest against snack advertisements targeting children, and in 2004 the Advertising Association agreed to impose stricter regulations.\textsuperscript{13}

In social action theatre, performance is a direct and immediate way of communicating with people who have little access to information and have been cowed into submission. By presenting facts about difficult and frightening
issues such as HIV-AIDS or land rights in familiar storylines and theatrical styles, it helps the spectators take control of their lives.

"Contemporary Modernity"

Within this multifaceted and cotemporaneous fabric of traditional, modern, and contemporary performance, what connects the productions discussed in this book is an overarching concern with perceptions of “contemporary modernity”—what does “modernity” mean, provide, threaten at this moment in the twenty-first century. It examines the cultural dimensions of “contemporary modernity” as it is expressed on Southeast Asian stages: each chapter adopts a slightly different approach to document the unique conditions and expressions of each country’s theatre practice. The chapters are grouped according to three general and overlapping themes. Although their scope attempts to be as inclusive as possible, some important troupes and productions are not discussed because they fall outside the purview of these three themes or they have been given fuller discussion elsewhere.

The first group, which includes Thailand, Vietnam, and Bali, is defined by the increased participation of women in the performing arts. Their growing involvement at all levels of public presentation challenges the most entrenched of traditional hierarchies in which women’s performance was bound up with the display of their sexual attractions. Social change, the role of higher education, new government policies, and the impetus of mothers to improve the lot of their daughters are encouraging women to be more involved in the creative areas of directing, playwriting, and producing as well as performing. By insisting on the inclusion of women’s perspectives, thoughts, and feelings on the stage as well as their bodies, women have altered the nature of the theatre’s practice and presentations.

The second group, which includes Cambodia, Singapore, and Burma/Myanmar, shows a common concern with the effects of censorship and the ambivalent aspects of performing in a globalized economy. On the one hand, censorship curbs artistic freedom, yet it inspires theatre practitioners to use coded expressions and other innovative ways to avoid the censor and still communicate with their audiences. Pulling in the opposite direction are the blandishments of global advertising and pop culture, which not only lure audiences away from stage performance but tempt theatre troupes to incorporate them into their own presentations as well. Global travel and festivals create new contexts, so the impact of global exposure and international recognition when groups or individual performers travel abroad is also examined.
The third group, the Philippines, Laos, and Malaysia, is characterized by a focus on nationalism and how theatre either contributes to official versions of historical and political events, or creates alternative narratives. Theatre as a public medium is used by government to support its views and policies, but since the early twentieth-century spoken drama and independent productions have often taken a critical stance toward those in power. Some troupes are clearly in one camp or the other, but many also negotiate between the two and explore the possibility of a national identity separate from that which is defined and controlled by governments. Playwrights and troupes also strive to find ways to bind their communities, which are divided by class, economics, religion, and ethnicity, especially when politicians stir up fear and suspicion between them to further their own agendas.

Within the framework of these three basic themes all chapters also discuss a range of influences on Southeast Asian dramatists from outside the region, whether it be the collaboration with foreign colleagues, the incorporation of foreign techniques and texts, the provision of foreign financial assistance, the quest for international recognition, or even the availability of alternative models to local practice. The interpenetration of global and local images and ideas is occurring at such a frenzied pace and on so many levels that much contemporary performance is devoted to making some kind of sense of it for local audiences.

Only by watching performances in situ, among the spectators for whom they are intended, do we get a feel for the theatre’s cultural import as a creative response to the social changes being experienced by both spectators and performers. But this too, is changing, as performers shape their work to attract and meet the expectations of foreign audiences both in and outside their countries of origin. Thus, to understand the changes the theatre is undergoing, one must also include the alteration in its audiences, the shifts of location, composition, expectation, and aesthetic criteria.

When I began this research, there was little on the Internet about Southeast Asian performance, and YouTube did not exist. Over the past decade, information has proliferated due to the ease of posting and accessing visual material and the availability of personal commentary and scholarly analysis. Not only do performers and troupes have their own websites, but online newspapers provide reviews, and nonprofit organizations have compiled data on Southeast Asian cultures. The amount of material is almost more than one can properly digest. Theatrical activity still needs to be put into some cultural context to
examine its possible meanings within its own society as well as its contributions to theatre developments globally.

Southeast Asian theatres reflect the aspirations and anxieties of their societies and the underlying frisson between the old and new. With the great thrust of economic development in the 1980s and 1990s, Southeast Asia was swept up by the global tsunami of material acquisition and consumption. Those who have persisted working in the live theatre distinguish themselves as a distinct minority because they have stepped outside the path of the wave to better view it and respond creatively to it. In contrast to the noise, chaos, crowds, and pollution on the busy streets of Southeast Asia’s bustling capitals, the theatres, rehearsal studios, and drama schools are oases of exploratory activity, havens of playfulness, commitment, and idealism where writers, directors, and actors form their own communities, simultaneously part of society and outside of it, communities of imagination.

Benedict Anderson coined the term “imagined communities” to refer to new nation-states: “I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” He further defined them: “Nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it in the religious community and the dynastic realm.”

I propose that contemporary performers and troupes in Southeast Asia also have to be understood in the context not only of previous and current cultural systems, but also in relation to the global theatre trends in which they find colleagues and audiences that differ from those at home. The stage itself is their home, where performers create an imaginary world and invite spectators to enter and relieve themselves of the pressures of daily life and express their emotional responses unabashedly. Performers form special communities of imagination by virtue of the primacy they give to creating and performing imaginative ephemera—in contrast to the pragmatic imperatives dominating their cultures, and the world, in the twenty-first century.