

# Performing arts take a significant step forward



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## **The inaugural BIPAM put the 14th BTF firmly on the world performing arts networking map**

THE INCLUSION of the first Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (Bipam) to the annual 14th Bangkok Theatre Festival (BTF) last month proved overwhelming positive. And the result is that the Festival is no longer merely Thailand's largest showcase of Thai theatre, but the region's first networking platform for international performing arts

practitioners, producers, presenters, programmers, scholars and students.

Part of that success can be put down to the efforts made by BTF's organisers who sought to prepare potential audiences as well as the artists themselves through such activities as talks, forums and workshops. In this respect, support was provided by Japan Foundation Bangkok and Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC). Among the preparatory activities was a performing arts expo held in early September at K-Bank Siam Pic-Ganesha Centre of Performing Arts, targeting high-school students interested in tertiary education and careers in this field.



*“We Women II: Trigger Warning” was staged at the BACC’s 5th floor auditorium.*

A collaboration between the Bangkok Theatre Network (BTN), the Alliance of Performing Arts in Higher Education of Thailand (Path), the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC)—Thailand Centre and the BACC, with strong support from Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), Bipam was held from November 14 to 18 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and Sodsai Pantomkomol Centre for



*Peng! Palast members gave a workshop after their performance.*

Key members from the organising body served on Bipam's advisory and working committees. The programme, all conducted in English, comprised various sessions of informal coffee talks in the morning on such topics as "building up new audiences" and "sharing Thai script"; lunch chats with Thai food; afternoon roundtable talks on, for example, "traditional performance in the contemporary context"; and presentations on, among others, "Nang Yai and western theatre practice" and "juxtaposition between politics and aesthetics".



*A Singaporean producer shared his thoughts.*

In the evening, the Bipam showcase featured a curated programme of six productions from four countries: “We Women II: Trigger Warning” by We...Women Team (India), “Fight! Palast # membersonly” by Peng! Palast (Switzerland), “Full Service” by Daniel Hellmann (Switzerland), “Kuang Qi” by Move Theatre (Taiwan), “[Co/Exist]” by Full Fat Theatre (Thailand) and “Little Red in the Ruins” by ForWhat Theatre (Thailand), in addition to their workshops, interviews and post-show discussions. Late every evening, there was more opportunity for further networking among Bipam delegates at a designated bar.

Bipam is the brainchild of Studio 41’s director and producer Chavatvit “Should” Muangkeo, who was invited by Japan Foundation to represent BTN at TPAM: Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama, Asia’s largest platform for international performing arts exchange, this February.



*Taiwanese actress and singer Kuan Ching collected plenty of Thai fans thanks to her performance in Move Theatre’s “Kuang Qi”.*

“At TPAM, I met numerous leading producers, festival directors, representatives from cultural organisations, theatre managers, journalists, and NGOs whose works are connected or relate to performing arts there,” says Should.

“TPAM is truly driving international contemporary performing arts forward, always presenting something new and inspiring. That’s why everyone in the field wants to be there. The elephants in the room, though, were Thai artists whose performances [like Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s projection performance “Fever Room” and Pradit Prasartthong and Anatta Theatre Troupe’s lecture-performance “Len Likay: Play of My Life”] were presented as key TPAM programmes. Both were loved by hundreds of performing arts professionals who may later bring them to their home countries, but none had never been presented in Thailand.”



*Thai students discussed with Swiss artist Daniel Hellmann what they’d like him to do and at what price.*

Despite having a similar acronym, Bipam is not simply the Thai copycat of TPAM. “I wanted to create the same opportunity for our artists and

audiences. After many long talks with performing arts professionals here, I decided to come up with a different approach,” Should explains.

“Bipam is not about advancing the performing arts industry but is an open platform for the Thai and Southeast Asian performing arts communities to connect with one another and the rest of the world. It should be a destination where Thai and Southeast Asian talent and creativity can be discovered. It’s a launch pad for those who have come up with brilliant ideas, ready to be further developed and seen by the world. I want to make sure that after Bipam fulfils this ambition, being a performing artist here will be considered a legitimate occupation. Plus, I want to elevate our audience experience during the BTF by presenting performances of great quality by Thai and international artists, here in Bangkok.”



*Communication arts professor and member of Anatta Theatre Troupe Sukanya Sompiboon presented her paper “Juxtaposition Between Aesthetics and Politics”.*

Having watched his baby take its first steps, Should reflects, “Our biggest achievement this year was the fact that we successfully convinced a

government agency to support us. TCEB is an economic driver who sees arts festivals as a good opportunity for our country. This is great. But of course it'd be even better if we also received full support from another sector of the government whose mission is to directly support contemporary arts community [like our Ministry of Culture, the worldwide counterparts of which are supporting this kind of festivals and platforms].”

He adds, “Our first step this year was a solid example that we really can make it happen [notwithstanding the fact that the preparation time was only eight months]. With a longer preparation period and more proper support from all parties in the performing arts community – be it the artists, scholars, journalists, critics, and of course, the government – our goals can soon be reached.”



*Bipam delegates, from left, the US, Thailand, South Korea and Japan.*

Having attended numerous international performing arts festivals and exchange platforms, though never TPAM, myself, I was especially delighted to welcome this new baby. Often asked by international



producers, programmers, presenters, critics and scholar colleagues when is the best time to visit Bangkok to see what's happening on Thai stage, my answer has always been the first few weeks of November. I explain, "It's not too warm, there's little rain and, most importantly, there's the Bangkok Theatre Festival (BTF). And if you really want to be a tourist, you can take part in our Loy Krathong Festival."

Now, of course, I can add a clause to that, "and as an integral part of BTF is Bipam." With the aforementioned range of activities and networking opportunities, that'd be more convincing and I'm sure that many more of my colleagues will visit my hometown in the near future.

It should also be noted here that Hiromi Maruoka, TPAM's director, also attended Bipam among scores of other international delegates from Southeast Asia in addition to Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, India, Bangladesh, France, Switzerland and the US. The number of participating countries, I am certain, will continue to grow.

That said, there should be more connection and collaboration between BTF and Bipam. While they share the same website and booklet and audiences could book tickets from the same channel, the Bipam programme was not part of the BTF leaflet. Also, while Bipam was a great opportunity for performing arts students to not only meet but also learn from foreign professionals, the fact that most activities were on weekdays, and their professors didn't assign them to these activities, meant that they could only catch the performances in the evening.

And for Bipam and BTF to further develop, more financial and administrative from the government is necessary. For example, while Bipam strives to become a Southeast Asia platform, everyone is well aware that mobilising SEA artists and productions is financially very difficult unless Singapore is the host, and that's partly why there were no regional performances as part of Bipam.

It's also noteworthy that three out of six productions in the Bipam Showcase were possible here only because of firm financial support by

foreign organisations—”Fight! Palast” and “Full Service” by Pro Helvetia as part of its “Swiss Window in Asia Performing Arts Series” and “Kuang Qi” by Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture through its Southbound Policy. A timely reminder that one cannot curate without money.

Language, like in many other attempts to work in this region, seemed also to be a problem as the Bipam official language of English scared many people away. Translation and interpretation can be possible, with financial support.

But considering this was its inaugural edition, everyone agrees that Bipam worked like a charm.