Thai Contemporary Musical Theatre: A Case Study on Professional Musical Producers, Dreambox and Scenario^{1,2}

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Abstract

Nowadays, Thai contemporary musical theatre is one type of entertainment which is very popular among Thais. Dreambox and Scenario are the key professional producers who have been creatively producing musicals for a decade. Thai contemporary musical theatre produced by two major production companies share two distinct attributes: the female protagonist and the presentation of the female protagonist's love. Their constant improvements through their acquired experiences have been recognized as the producer's identity. From the analysis, the major identities of each producer are outlined as follows. The identity of Dreambox is signified through its intense and realistic productions, while those making up Scenario's identity focus on spectacular presentations. Importantly, these attributes should be considered as having a great impact on the prosperity of Thai contemporary musical theater both in academic and professional society up until the present day.

Keywords: Musical Theatre, Dreambox, Scenario

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ละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัย: กรณีศึกษาจากกลุ่มผู้ผลิตละครมืออาชีพ ดรีมบ็อกซ์และซีเนริโอ ⁴

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บทคัดย่อ

ละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัยเป็นรูปแบบความบันเทิงที่ได้รับความนิยมมากในปัจจุบัน บริษัท ดรีมบ็อกซ์ จำกัด และบริษัท ซีเนริโอ จำกัด คือสองบริษัทผลิตละครอาซีพที่มุ่งสร้างสรรค์ละคร เพลงไทยร่วมสมัยอย่างต่อเนื่องตลอดระยะเวลาสิบปีที่ผ่านมา ละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัยที่ได้รับการ สร้างสรรค์จากทั้งสองบริษัทมีองค์ประกอบร่วมกันสองประการสำคัญ ได้แก่ การมีตัวละครเอก เป็นหญิง และการนำเสนอเรื่องความรักของตัวละครเอกหญิง พัฒนาการการสั่งสมประสบการณ์ ในการทำงาน ตลอดจนเอกลักษณ์สำคัญของละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัยที่สร้างสรรค์โดยทั้งสอง บริษัท กล่าวคือ การเน้นเนื้อหาของละครให้มีความเข้มข้นสมจริงของดรีมบ็อกซ์ และการเน้น รูปแบบการนำเสนอที่มีความตระการตาของซีเนริโอ มีผลทำให้ละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัยมีความโดด เด่น ชัดเจน นับเป็นก้าวสำคัญของวงการศิลปะการละครในประเทศไทยทั้งด้านวิชาการและ วิชาชีพ

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⁴ บทความวิชาการนี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์ดุษฎีบัณฑิตเรื่อง "จากวรรณกรรมสู่ละครเพลงไทยร่วมสมัย: ความรักกับการประกอบสร้างตัวละครเอกหญิง" คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

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Introduction

This article aims to present the history of two producers of Thai contemporary musical theatre who have been creating performances throughout the last 10 years. These musical producers are Dreambox Company Limited and Scenario Company Limited. In addition, the article compares the identity of musicals produced by each with an emphasis on pointing out that both producers are successful because they have extensive experience in theatrical arts. This allows them to distinctly create performances that harmonize with the taste of Thai audiences. Dreambox places an importance on the realistic and logical plot and intends to give the audience a new perspective in order to enrich the literature that the musicals originated from. On the contrary, Scenario focuses on the show; hence its performances are sentimental. This is because Scenario presents spectacular things on the stage that makes the audience feel and experience it for themselves. In this article, the differences of both producers are analyzed through a comparative case study of Thai contemporary musicals entitled "Mae Nark the Musical" (2009) produced by Dreambox and "Mae Nark Phra Khanong the Musical" (2009) produced by Scenario. Both shows are created based on the legend of Mae Nark which is the most well-known ghost story in Thailand (Saichon Satayanurak, 2003). The analysis of this comparative case study will be presented later in this article.

The popularity of Thai contemporary musical theatre is a phenomenon which first appeared in Thai society in 2002. It can be said that Thai contemporary musical theatre is not a new form of entertainment in society since it was partly developed from the Musical Drama (Lakorn Rong), till the time when genuine male and female actors performed on stage. Additionally, to some extent it was influenced by American Musical Theatre commonly known as Broadway. Such influences can be seen in the magnificent shows given by both companies. However, the popularity of Thai contemporary musical theatre is limited to a particular group of producers and audiences who can afford it. There are only two professional producers mentioned above who have been producing shows, as both of them are equipped with the appropriate staff and budget. Similarly, only those who can afford a ticket, which is more expensive than the ticket price of other types of entertainment will come to see the show. Nevertheless, the present writer believes that the popularity of Thai contemporary musical theatre is a phenomenon that cannot be overlooked because of two important reasons. One is that it revives people's appreciation for theatrical performances which have become less and less popular since an economic downturn in 1997. Watching musicals can help indicate the identity of an audience as it is considered a modern and classy activity to do. Another reason is that Thai contemporary musicals use well known literature as their basis which influences how the play's script is written. Therefore, the writer expects that a play's script written from famous literature will remain popular in the future like screenplays of movies and TV series had been before.

The term "Musical Theatre" which appears in this article refers to a live performance on stage which mainly tells a story through songs. Music, performances, movement, and dancing are key components of the show (E. Novak & D. Novak., 1996). Musical theatre is adapted from novels, legends, and screenplays of TV series. The following describes the background of the two production companies and compares the identities of their musicals respectively.

Background of Dreambox and Scenario

The Dreambox Company Limited (2001) was previously called the Dass Entertainment Company Limited, a producer of children's musicals. Dreambox was Daraka Wongsiri, established by Sangarun Kanjanarat Chakraworawut. Daraka Wongsiri and Sangarun Kanjanarat both graduated from Chulalongkorn University, majoring in Dramatic Art and Suwandee Chakraworawut graduated from Thammasat University majoring in Drama. They founded the first professional drama group in Thailand in 1990. Their objectives were to present dramatic arts to the Thai people and to stimulate the audience's interest and appreciation of this type of art. As well they expected to create job opportunities for those who loved dramatic arts. Nowadays, the Dreambox Company Limited is the oldest professional drama group in Thailand which has been producing a variety of shows which include comedies, family dramas, and mysteries. Most of these performances are from original scripts. However, if they were taken from Western dramas or adapted from other play scripts, the context is altered so it is meaningful to Thai audiences. Therefore, Dreambox's drama appeals to various groups of viewers like adults, adolescents, and children. This is why their performances have been warmly welcomed and the company can stay in business. Dreambox's income is from selling tickets and fund raising from their supporters. In addition, the company applies a membership system as a strategy to target their audience.

A key factor which contributed to Dreambox's capacity to continuously produce musicals is that they establish a theatre on New Petchburi road in 1993. This theatre has been used to support the growth of the shows produced by the company which have become more and more popular. Bangkok Theatre is a theatre which has a proscenium design. Its capacity is 700 seats and it is well equipped with all the high technological aids. However, after the property was sold, Dreambox cooperated with EGV Entertainment Company Public Limited and established a new theatre called Bangkok Theatre @ Metropolis on Ratchdamri road in 2005. After that Dreambox struck a deal with Sahamanoonphol Company Limited, the new landowner of Bangkok Theatre, to renovate the theatre before reopening it with a new name "M Theatre" in August 2008. It is still being used at present. Kulthida Maneerat (Maneerat, 2008) divides the evolution of Dreambox into three phases: an initial phase; a flourishing phase; and a declining phase.

First, the initial phase (1990-1993) is when the company was trying to establish itself and was exploring the audience's taste by producing various musicals aimed at a wide audience. Then, the flourishing phase (1994-1997), in relation to the growing economy, is when the company was capable of making more performances. As a result, the number of shows increased and a marketing company was hired to promote musicals until watching theatre became popular with the middle-class. Moreover, Dreambox could increase its audience by participating in the management of Bangkok Theatre and by running its shows at Chalermkrung Theatre. Finally, the declining phase (1998-2002) is in relation to the economic recession in 1997. Consequently, Dreambox had to reduce the number of shows made each year, it produced smaller and less spectacular shows, and adapted old play's scripts which were performed by a new group of actors so that it could survive the economic downturn.

As mentioned earlier Dreambox is capable of producing various styles of shows, musical theatre is one form of entertainment that Dreambox creates. Daraka explains "Originally, Dreambox made a musical family show for children once a year, or sometimes 2-3 shows a year. Later on, we wanted to introduce an operetta presented as sung-through musicals. The latter one has more complicated content" (An interview with Daraka Wongsiri, 2011). Therefore, Dreambox has been producing musicals like Koo Kam (Soul mate) the Musical (2003), Mae Naak the Musical (2009), Nam Sai Jai Jing (True Spirit) (2011), and Prissana the Musical (2012). Since Dreambox is the first professional producer of Thai contemporary musical theatre who continuously creates shows, they have their regular audience who appreciates the identity of their musicals. As these audiences are the company's big fans, Dreambox successfully earns both fame and money.

Scenario Company Limited was founded in 2004, and has grown as a professional producer rapidly. Scenario is widely popular because a television station supports the company and broadcasts their productions on television. Thus, Scenario has gained a larger audience than Dreambox. Thakonkiat Weerawan, the founder of Scenario graduated from Boston University majoring in broadcasting. When starting his career at Grammy Entertainment Public Limited Company, he was the producer of a situation comedy which was so popular that he started his own company "Exact Company Limited" established in 1991. Exact initially produced TV series and later created various types of productions including sit-coms, TV dramas, TV series, movies, game shows, and reality shows. Thakonkiat's strategy which originated from working in television is worthwhile as he said "I have worked in television so I can source actors and staff members easily. Also, I can build my reputation which will attract people, people will want to work with us and our audiences will also grow." (Thakonkiat Weerawan, 2010). After gaining experience and establishing himself in

television he decided that it was time to follow his dream of producing Thai contemporary musicals.

Scenario's objective is to create shows for a wide range of Thai audiences who have never experienced a theatrical performance before, and hope that these audiences will be eager to watch the show (Thakonkiat Weerawan, 2010). Its first musical production was *Wimanmeuang* (City Heaven) (1997) which was difficult to produce since most of the staff had never watched musicals either. Therefore, Thakonkiat solved this problem by taking his staff to watch Broadway musicals so that they could understand more about musicals and their own production. His aim was to have his staff learn about the shows on Broadway so that they could adapt the shows to Thai audiences (Thakonkiat Weerawan, 2010). Then Scenario created a show called *Banlangmek* (*Cloud Thrown*) the Musical (2001) which was later adapted into a TV series 'Bangkok 2485 the Musical' (2004), a show created to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Grammy Entertainment Public Limited Company. The story is told using Grammy's songs. After that, Scenario made "Tawiphop (Two World) the Musical" (2005) which was Scenario's first show adapted from a novel.

Similar to Dreambox, Scenario made a significant move by opening their own theatre so that they could continue making productions and have a place to show them for as long as they wanted. Scenario cooperated with Muang Thai Life Assurance Co., Ltd., to open 'Muang Thai Rachadalai Theatre' on Ratchadapisek road in 2006. The musicals played at this theatre were; Fa Jarod Sai (Sky Reaches Sand) the Musical (2007); Banlangmek the Musical (2007), remade at the audience's request, Kanglang Phap (Behind the Scene) the Musical (2008), Mae Naak Phra Khanong the Musical (2009), Hong Nheur Mangkorn (Swan upon Dragon) the Musical (2010); Tawiphop the Musical (2011), remade with new leading actors; and Si Phan Din (Four Reigns) the Musical (2011-2012).

It is noticeable that although all of Takonkiat's works adapt forms and content from Broadway, or at least they are influenced by Broadway, a distinct aspect of his work is an attempt to combine the musicals' forms and content to harmonize with Thai audience's taste. Takonkiat comments that "Those who work in entertainment in Thailand gained a lot of knowledge and skills abroad, but we always consider how to adapt all of the productions to make Thai audiences understand. We compromise what we dream for the sake of being accepted by the Thai audience" (Thakonkiat Weerawan, 2010). Because of his concern with the audience's preference, almost all the performances he creates have been greatly welcomed as they are easily understandable as well as being modern and interesting.

Thai Contemporary Musical Theatre: Attributes shared by Dreambox and Scenario

A study of Thai contemporary musical theatre made by Dreambox and Scenario reveals that both production companies share two important attributes. One is that both use a female protagonist as the leading character. She is very realistic because she has both positive and negative personalities. This contrasts with the classic female protagonist who merely shows positive attributes. Both Dreambox and Scenario intend to present modern contemporary women through the female protagonist. In other words, she is well educated, works for a living, and is self-sufficient. She thinks by herself, dares to speak out, and sets her own goals. Furthermore, Dreambox and Scenario make their female leading character represent a decent Thai traditional woman who is sweet, gentle, delicate, and well-behaved. She also values her virginity and considers her family the most important thing in her life (Boonyong Katetate, 1992). Thai contemporary musical theatre, therefore, notably presents a female protagonist who has the desirable qualities of Thai women.

Another common attribute is that the story is driven by the female protagonist's love. When making musicals from literature, love stories will be focused on and become the main plot of the show, whereas other genres in literature get less attention. Thus, it can be said that Thai contemporary musical theatre focuses on romantic storylines with three main plots: the female protagonist's love for her lover or husband, the female protagonist's love for her children, and the female protagonist's love for her nation. The first one presents the female protagonist's dramatic action⁶

when she encounters hardship and fights hard so that she can live happily later in her life. Even though there is not a happy ending for some female protagonists who are not able to live with their loved one or they don't get love in return, the plot shows how they learn, accept their own destiny, and obtain compensation for their disappointment. Regarding the plot illustrating a mother's love, it focuses on the dramatic action of the female protagonist whose ultimate aim is her child's happiness and achievements. She believes in a mother's great love, and she sacrifices anything to bring happiness and prosperity to her child. Finally, the last plot centers the attention on the female protagonist's love for her country, it demonstrates that this is a significant motive and focuses on her faith to achieve this goal.

After examining their plots, it is obvious that Thai contemporary musical theatre praises the female protagonist's love as the most important thing in her life. That's why in musicals, the female leading actor attempts to fight all barriers of her love and devotes everything for her love. For the audience watching musicals temporarily frees them from all stress and responsibility of daily life, and takes them to an imaginary world which is attractive, beautiful and fascinating (Barker, 2003).

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⁶ The main act that a character has been attempting to do throughout the show in order to fulfill his/her ultimate accomplishment (Taylor, 2002).

Therefore, musical theatre is one kind of entertainment that seduces them into a love illusion.

Dreambox and Scenario: Different Identities of Contemporary Musicals

Although sharing some attributes in common, Dreambox and Scenario have different styles in the form and presentation of musicals.

Dreambox: Passion for Art

Dreambox's musicals have a distinct identity, they are intense and realistic play's which are written by Daraka Wongsiri, a playwright. She is respected as the only professional playwright in Thailand. She has been doing this job for over two decades. Her play's scripts are as good as classical literature in terms of plot structure, character creation and symbols used (Kittisak Suwanpokin, 2003). Dreambox's quality scripts introduce new perspectives of well-known literature leading the audience to understand the characters' motives. This is done by developing the characters background so that the audience can understand them and sympathize with their acts. This is why the characters in Dreambox's musicals are realistic. As a result, the way Dreambox presents an old story in a new way generates new perspectives for the audience.

A good example that distinctively shows Dreambox's intense and realistic musical production is a presentation of the female protagonist "Mae Naak" in "Mae Naak the Musical." It presents the famous legend of Mae Naak in a new way by making up her characteristics, and displays the second most important plot of a mother's love. To create intense and realistic characters the play's script stresses an importance on forming believable character backgrounds which are the same as real humans. Thus, the first half of the play focuses on showing that Mae Naak is human while the second act presents a controversy emphasizing Mae Naak's love for Pho Maak. This helps the audience understand why Mae Naak has a strong bond with Pho Maak even when she does not belong to the same world as him anymore. Mae Naak has serious disputes with Khun Prajan and Mae Tongkam, her parents; hence she chooses love over her family and runs away to live together with Pho Maak. However, almost all of the Phra Khanong village people, particularly Mae Mheun, Pho Maak's mother, do not accept her because she has broken tradition and she is also not very good at doing housework. Mae Mheun does not accept Mae Nark as a daughter in law. In Mae Naak the Musical not only the main characters, but also the minor characters are made to be intense and real, so the audience sympathizes with Mae Mheun who loves her only child so much that she thinks Mar Naak does not deserve her son. Moreover, Mae Mheun's hatred increases when Pho Maak takes his wife's side. Consequently, Pho Maak takes Mae Naak to live separately to protect his

wife from his mother. Mae Mheun's hatred of Mae Naak is so overwhelming that the audience can understand why she purposefully refuses to bring a midwife to help Mae Naak to give birth, and this is the cause of death of Mae Naak.

Considering the presentation of the character's new perspectives, *Mae Naak the Musical* shows that Mae Naak is a gentle woman who believes in love. She never uses her power to harm or haunt the villagers who were against her and Pho Maak's love. An important scene when Pho Maak knows that his wife is a ghost has a very realistic feel and reflects Mae Naak's gentleness when she tries to protect her baby from a shaman who wants to take the baby's corpse to make a guardian spirit. Mae Naak tries to ask for mercy, but when left with no choice she has to use her power to make herself bigger and bigger until the shaman dies from a heart attack. She regrets this first and only human death she causes. As a result, her power declined, and while making dinner for Pho Maak she vacantly lengthens her arm to grab a lime that has fallen down to the basement of the house. Once she is aware that Pho Maak's action of running away is a consequence of losing her own consciousness, she can do nothing but feel sorrow.

Regarding the presentation of the story's new perspectives, *Mae Naak the Musical* illustrates how cruel humans can be to each other as it is said "A man is worse than a ghost." This new point of view has been used as the second major plot in the story. The villagers' and Mae Mheun's cruelty has been underlined throughout the entire story. Even after Mae Naak finally left to go to the other world, Mae Mheun's hatred did not go, as she blames Mae Naak for being the reason that her son abandons her and leaves her to live alone towards the end of her life. Thus, Mae Mheun is the one who starts telling and retelling the story of the brutality and ferocity of the ghost Mae Naak; hence the legend of Mae Naak is twisted. A ghost who can't leave this world because she clings to her love becomes a merciless ghost that kills because of jealousy and hatred. This is a well-known legend of Mae Naak that audiences are familiar with as well.

Dreambox's presentation of Thai contemporary musicals focuses on the relevant content rather than spectacular shows. Suwandee said "It's been researched for Dreambox's musicals. A grand presentation in the musicals is just a supporting part of the point being presented." (Sirinthorn Juengpitakudom, 2009). Suwandee's view echoes the identity of Dreambox which places the importance more on the plot presentation than the show presentation. Dreambox's musicals, therefore, show more creativity than grand magnificence. An obvious example of this is a scene from *Mae Naak the Musical* when Pa Kae (an old aunt), a drunken midwife, who was tricked into drinking so much that she didn't go to help Mae Naak give birth, drowned because Mae Naak's ghost shocked her. A newspaper column commented that "The scene of the midwife's death is impressive as it uses all theatrical techniques. We see a drowning midwife presented from light, pictures on the screen, and puppet manipulation—a technique used to lift an actor who is drowning, and make it seem

real as they are floating and sinking under water (Art and Living column, 2009). The presentation of this scene makes it scary because it looks so real mainly due to the acting. This scene is interesting because the actor is mimicking being a puppet as she is being lifted by others. She is trying to swim and some motions are created to help the audience feel uncomfortable and suffer the same as the one who is trying to survive the drowning. These are presented without investing in spectacular show presentations. It can be said that it does not negatively affect Dreambox's musical presentations at all, for not imitating the spectacular shows from Broadway. On the other hand, the simplicity and creativity which is one of the charms of a live performance can help deal with the limitations on stage. This is a limitation of the venue, as a stage show cannot be performed in a real location so it needs to find a way to encourage the audience to use their imagination with what they see on the stage (Rutnis, 1996).

Scenario: Spectacular

Scenario's contemporary musicals are similar to Broadways which are considered the originals, all presentations of their musicals on stage have the finest equipment, lights, sound, and costumes. All are magnificent and show various techniques which are used in musicals such as using an axle to change large scenes very quickly, and moving actors by a hoist so that it looks as if they are flying. All these impress the audience and make them satisfied. Scenario presents musicals in the same way as Broadway. Broadway gives inspiration to Takonkiat's work as he describes his impression of Broadway musicals "We feel that we get into an imaginary world and we are set free from the shackles of the real world." This is reinforced with research revealing that a dazzling show is one of the key factors attracting audiences, the same way that we can trick a chicken to take medicine by using candy. This is the way musicals fascinate us and the way we want to fascinate our audience as well" (Takonkiat Weerawan, 2010). Takonkiat thinks that a spectacular show is the most important thing to be taken from Broadway. He wants to fascinate his audience and make them feel involved with his shows. Thus, all Scenario's musicals are presented magnificently. This quality plays an important part in forming the audience's impression of the shows and making them feel so 'full' that they think the musicals are worth watching. It also impresses them that Thai contemporary musicals are the same quality as those produced on Broadway.

The production of Mae Naak Phra Khanong the Musical aims at creating an atmosphere that shows how chilling the ghost of Mae Naak is. On the stage the ghost of Mae Naak appears which the audience is familiar with. Special effects make it even more terrifying. The musical starts when the actors are whispering to one another "If you do not believe, don't challenge" to create a sense of horror. Then the audience sees the ghost of Mae Naak wearing a Thai sarong and red breast cloth. She is appearing in the form of a woman with long hair who is holding her baby while

whimpering her husbands name "Pho Maak." There is a scene that rouses the audience and makes them scream unexpectedly. In this scene, a hoist is used to haul the ghost of Mae Naak towards the audience who is sitting in the middle lower rows and it goes almost as high as those who are sitting on the upper floor of the theatre. In addition, Mae Naak's house has been changed from a beautiful house to a haunted house. As well, a Pi Mon (a Thai flute which originated from a Mon musical instrument) is being played to create the moans in this scene of despair.

The content of *Mae Naak Phra Khanong the Musical* is taken from the legend of Mae Naak. The ghost of Mae Naak is presented as an unreasonable and jealous ghost who demands Pho Maak for herself. Consequently, throughout the story she haunts and kills the villagers who stand before her and Pho Maak. This presentation makes her look like an evil spirit rather than a human being. Furthermore, the musical adds a humorous part, in which the frightened villagers are hiding inside a large earthen jar. This is to help the audience relax and have fun while watching it.

Based on the aforementioned, the background and identities of the two musical production company's, Dreambox and Scenario, have been clarified. They provide alternatives to audiences who like to watch musicals. Both of them are pioneers in Thai contemporary musical production and will continue to produce contemporary musicals in the present and in the future. The popularity of contemporary musicals nowadays will pave a clearer direction for the future of dramatic arts in Thailand. As a result, dramatic arts in Thailand will be advancing as more development will occur in this field. It will also be regarded and respected as a profession.

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