

DIRECTING A STAGE PLAY “KARM PAYABATH”

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study principles of analysis, interpretation, and concepts of directing a stage play *Karm Payabath*. This play was restaged as a thesis project of Theatre Arts student at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU) for the 2023 academic year. It is an adaptation of Agatha Christie’s best-selling mystery novel named “*And then there were none.*” Research methods include studying the play analysis and documented data, analyzing and casting the performers, observing the stage design process, rehearsals and performances, interviews, recording of photos and videos of the stage performance. The researcher found that directing of *Karm Payabath* in 2023 can communicate the main idea of the story for the audience effectively. By utilizing the analysis of the play script and key performance elements of Aristotle’s Poetics such as plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle, the director can create powerful stories that move and inspire Thai audiences. This research results will serve as guidelines for the study of directing and can be applied to directing other stage play.

Keywords: Directing, Karm Payabath, Agatha Christie, stage play, SSRU Theatre

INTRODUCTION

Karm Payabath is a stage play script adapted by Nataporn Rattanachaiwong. It is an adaptation of Agatha Christie’s best-selling mystery novel named “*And then there were none.*” Rattanachaiwong is one of the faculty members of the Department of Theatre Arts and Creative Entrepreneurship at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. She translated and adapted this novel into a stage play script by maintaining the main storyline and modifying in Thai contexts (Rattanachaiwong, 2018). From Agatha Christie’s novel, she bringing up issues of religious beliefs such as committing sin, karma, spirits or ghosts that haunted and became involved with the story. Most of Thais believe in spirits, fate and karma, this make them feel involved with the story and excited what is being seen on the stage. *Karm Payabath* was presented on stage as a thesis project of SSRU student for the first time in the 2016 academic and was restaged in 2023. The researcher as the director of this restaged production in 2023 interested in the main plot and the methods of stage directing. From consulting with Rattanachaiwong, the thesis advisor, it is necessary to change the context of the time period to be the modern era than before. As a result, this production created a new directing concept, interpretation and play analysis in a style that was different from the original adapted play script in 2016 such as a style of acting and theatre design for performance.

OBJECTIVE

To study the directing process of *Karm Payabath*, a thesis project of SSRU student 2023

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative research by using content analysis method. The research tools and steps are as follows: 1) Study related documents including the literary work of *"And Then There Were None"* by Agatha Christie, the stage play script *Karm Payabath*, the articles on Agatha Christie's strategies and adaptation of crime literature into stage plays. 2) Analyze, interpret and create a directing concept with key performance elements of Aristotle's Poetics such as plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. 3) Create the stage play *Karm Payabath* in order to collect the results of directing process and the presentation. And 4) Organize key performance elements, opinions, interviews and observations for analysis, discussion and summary of the research results in a descriptive way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initial information indicates that the stage play "Karm Payabath" is an adapted play inspired by the literature of Agatha Christie's novel 'And Then There Were None.' Therefore, literature and stage plays have many differences. Through studies and interviews with the adapter, it was found that the adaptation of the play adheres to Agatha Christie's method of adapting detective literature into stage plays as significant. Since Christie adapted her literature into stage plays, the adaptation of "Karm Payabath" from the original incorporates all aspects, including the narrative approach, the characteristics of the ten characters, the societal and cultural context, and beliefs. It can be said that the stage play "Karm Payabath" retains the storyline while maintaining the original literary essence unchanged, unlike Christie's stage play, where she adapted her work to conclude with justice instead of the tragic ending in the original literature. (Natthaphon Rattanchaiwong, 2018, pp. 74-80)

In the academic year 2023, the stage play "Karm Payabath" was brought back for further refinement to become an original theatrical production. This led to the revision and development of the play under the collaborative effort of the original play adapter and the director. Regarding the recent revisions to the latest version of the play, the researcher, considered both the director and the play adapter for this academic year, spearheaded the process. Apparent changes from the original can be observed, including: 1) The period shifted from 1957 to 1997. 2) Character traits: the character named "Suchat" (male servant) was changed to "Boonchom" (female servant), and the character "Saen-thep" (young boy aged 23) was transformed into a 28-year-old male who has self-interest in men. 3) Stage props and references within the play, such as changing the price of the boat from "Salun" to Thai Baht and updating the car model from Mercedes-Benz S-Class W124 to Mercedes-Benz S-Class W140, among others.

This stage play adopts an objective viewpoint, also known as the "God's eye view," as the narrative is not told through the perspective of any individual character. Instead, the audience follows the story in a "fourth wall" format, observing the play's events from outside. The director chose to present the play in a "realistic" manner.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the director's presentation has also evolved since its staging in the academic year 2016. For instance, the stage setting, derived from the narrative analysis of Arun (the character of a young military officer adapted from Philip Lombard in the literature), tells the tale of the current homeowner. This young, wealthy man enjoys a luxurious lifestyle, thus building a vacation home in the southern region after losing his wife and son, who moved abroad for business. Other characters also praise the beauty and grandeur of the house. This led to the stage's beautiful, luxurious, yet simple classic design and props.

In the play's original ending, when Vethaka (the character of a governess adapted from Vera Claythorne in the literature) hangs herself, the play concludes. However, the director

added imagery at the end to emphasize the narrative. This included using lighting effects to depict the stormy weather causing the lights in the house to flicker, showing shadows of Vethaka's hanging body on the staircase, the corpse of Chawit's (the character of a former judge who is the real murderer, adapted from Lawrence Wargrave in the literature), and Arun's dead body below. Then, the lights would go out again, leaving only a dimmed spotlight shining on the hidden Burmese figurine as a final note to underscore that the entire story unfolded as the poem foretold, with the murderer's plan successfully executed, leaving a chilling and gruesome atmosphere for the audience to absorb, before the play 'Karm Payabath' in the academic year 2023 came to a complete end.

The concept of directing from the analysis according to "The Poetics."

Aristotle's "The Poetics" explains the components of drama in six aspects: plot, character, thought, language, music, and spectacle. Researchers use these as topics for analyzing and interpreting plays, leading to the creation of directing concepts for the subsequent staging of theater productions.

1. Analysis of the plot structure

Exposition: The ten strangers gather at the remote Nillaburakham vacation home for various reasons, with Boonnom and Boonchom, the siblings who serve as caretakers, already present. They are joined by Vethaka, who was hired as a private secretary to represent the absent owner and verify the guests' identities. The guests include Capt. Arun, former judge Chawit, Detective Danai, Doctor Netnapa, Sumit former the magazine editor, Amara, and Saen-thep. Once all the guests are assembled, they are informed that the host will arrive the following day.

Inciting Incident: On the same day, while everyone was chatting and waiting for dinner, a mysterious voice emanated from a nearby room that Boonchom was instructed to open during dinner time. The recorded message accused all ten individuals in the house of committing crimes that resulted in the deaths of others, yet none of them faced legal consequences. This unsettling revelation led to increased anxiety among everyone, prompting an investigation into how each person arrived there. Upon investigation, it was discovered that the homeowner was non-existent, and everyone had been deceived into gathering there. Meanwhile, Saen-thep was poisoned with liquor and died.

Rising Actions and Crises: As dawn approached, while everyone prepared to escape from Kurong Island, news arrived that Boonchom had been killed with a nerve poison. At that moment, Sumit exhibited unusual behavior, becoming agitated and disoriented before being stabbed from behind while sitting alone on the balcony of the vacation home. It became evident to everyone that a mysterious murderer was among them. Shortly after, a rainstorm prevented them from leaving the island. During this time, Boonnom and Amara were killed one after the other. The power went out that night, and the generator failed, leaving the remaining five survivors in darkness, illuminated only by a lantern. This marked the incident where Chawit was shot through the forehead, and Netnapa disappeared, only to be found dead the following morning. Danai was trapped by falling rocks while inspecting the boat by the balcony.

Climax: The two survivors at that moment, Vethaka and Arun, could not avoid suspicion and distrust towards each other, leading to a final confrontation. They engaged in a brief struggle, during which Arun, armed with a gun that had previously gone missing before Chawin's death, was shot by Vethaka and turned into the next victim. While she was still shocked and in disbelief about what had happened, the real murderer, who had been lurking in the vacation home all along, revealed himself.

Resolution or Falling Action: Chawit reappears and explains the entire plot, revealing his true intentions: to punish the wrongdoers who had escaped legal consequences through his vigilante justice. He interpreted the ten stanzas of the poem of The game Hiding a cloth behind

one's back as a justification for his actions, leading to another confrontation with Vethaka, who ultimately gets shot and dies. After a prolonged struggle, with Vethaka being the sole survivor, she begins to experience hallucinations and paranoia about her guilt. Seeing supernatural occurrences, including the apparition of the boy who was killed to benefit her former lover, she decides to hang herself in the vacation home, leaving behind a mystery that no one could ever solve about what truly happened in that

2. Character

In directing a play, the director must interpret the characters to understand them better and then develop them to select actors who fit the characteristics of the characters. This involves training and rehearsal until finally creating the play. Understanding or analyzing characters can be done by considering various characteristics of the characters (Nopamas Waewhong, 2007, p.11).

Table 1: Character Analysis by Example of Analyzing 8 Main Characters

Character	External Characteristics	Social Status	Psychology	Morality
Chawit	Male, 65 years old, frail due to illness related to lungs	highly respected judge	deeply interested in law but also enjoys witnessing extreme violence,	morally corrupt, lacks conscience regarding his violent actions, prone to violent acts including murder.
Vethaka	Female, 25 years old, attractive and graceful	moderate financial status, employed as a secretary by an unnamed homeowner	involved in a love triangle, resorts to murder to secure her lover's inheritance	determined and decisive.
Aran	Male, 30 years old, handsome and robust	military officer	lacks a strong sense of responsibility	unrepentant about his actions.
Danai	Male, 33 years old, tall and slender	a former police officer turned detective of moderate status	sees justice is served	feels remorse for his actions.
Netnapa	Female, 44 years old, neat and petite	once a respected neurosurgeon, now a leading neurologist	There is an argument related to surgical errors due to intoxication leading to patient death, prompting quitting alcohol for life.	profoundly remorseful and guilt-ridden due to past surgical errors caused by intoxication.

Character	External Characteristics	Social Status	Psychology	Morality
Amra	Female, 62 years old, plump and composed	wealthy	Being within the confines of norms and conventions is always considered correct.	believes her actions are always justified, lacks remorse.
Sumit	Male, 54 years old, wears a mustache and glasses	prominent newspaper editor	schemes to send his beloved spouse's lover, his step-sibling, into a dangerous assignment leading to their demise	remembers his past actions but feels no guilt for them.
Saen-thep	Male, 28 years old, tall and fair-skinned, socially adept and arrogant	very wealthy	believes his wealth makes him superior	lacks social conscience and responsibility.

3. Thought

3.1 Theme

Finding the theme of a story is similar to summarizing the end of an episode by saying, "This story teaches us that." However, the story's theme does not always have to be instructive. From the analysis of the main character's actions, which are motivated by desires, leading to actions that face wisdom and obstacles, overcoming challenges, and resulting in consequences, the theme can be summarized in a table outlining the guidelines for analyzing the essence of the story, as follows:

Table 2: Analysis of the Protagonist to Summarize the Theme

Who	Desire	Problem and Obstacles	Overcoming the Problem	Overcoming the Problem: Outcome
Chawit	Chawit desires to commit a crime that no one can solve by planning to deceive all nine individuals (who are all criminals that the law cannot prosecute) to gather in a secluded vacation home on a private island and then proceed to murder the victims, including himself.	Chawit encounters resistance from Vethaka while he is killing, leading to a struggle that ultimately ends with Vethaka killing him, leaving Vethaka as the sole survivor in the house.	Chawit does not directly overcome Vethaka, who survives as the last person standing due to his death earlier. However, all of Chawit's plans and actions lead to Vethaka becoming aware of his actions and guilt, creating a haunting realization for him.	Although Chawit does not personally kill all nine victims, his intention ultimately succeeds as Vethaka commits suicide. As a result, no one can solve this crime

Summary of the Theme: "The human psyche is humanity's constant controller and indicator. Whether it is in light or darkness, it has the potential to create demons within humans."

3.2 Motif:

A motif refers to the central themes the author presents in the story. There are two principles in identifying motifs: prominent motifs and recurring motifs (Prawit Taengaksorn, 2000). The motif in this play is the poem of The game Hiding a cloth behind one's back, which is mentioned throughout the story from beginning to end. It serves as a prophecy indicating how each character will be murdered, creating anticipation about the next victim.

3.3 Symbol:

A symbol refers to anything that has its meaning and signifies other meanings simultaneously (Yuwapas (Prateepasen) Chaisinwattana, 2003, P.147-452). The symbols in the play "Karm Payabath" are the ten puppet dolls, each representing one of the ten characters in the story. If a puppet doll goes missing, it signifies that the murder of a victim has been successfully carried out.

4. Diction

In a play, the heart lies in the dialogue. Therefore, the director should pay special attention to this aspect because dialogues reveal the characters' personalities, thoughts, and emotions. They provide information about the story and background of the characters, depict actions and events, create atmosphere, and establish rhythm. This analysis involves analyzing the script and characters together with the actors, as well as during rehearsals.

5. Song

The use of songs as a component of the play is significant because, in ancient Greek times, stage plays were performed by chorus singers. Incidental music used in "Karm Payabath" mainly serves to create atmosphere and environment for the characters and the audience, providing believability and realism and helping to evoke emotions according to the

storyline, such as sounds of ocean waves, thunderstorms, gunshots, mysterious voices from a phonograph, and other things.

6. Spectacle

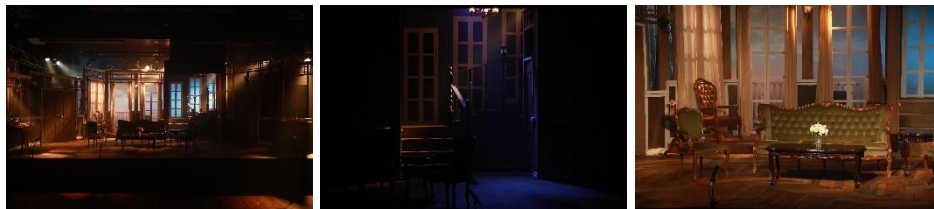
Spectacle in a play refers to everything the audience can see while watching the play. Apart from the actors' performances, it includes scenes, set props, lighting, costumes, and makeup. These elements are usually not explicitly mentioned in the script or are minimally present. It is the creators' responsibility to analyze the plot, characters, and storyline to reflect in the design for the performance. All these are essential components, and the designer must consider convenience in usage, performance, and budget.

6.1. Stage and Set Design

The concept behind the stage and set design is to blend European and Southeast Asian styles, focusing on the geographical characteristics of the southern region of Thailand as the design criterion to create realism and belief. This includes the hot and humid atmosphere with frequent storms. Additionally, analyzing the status of the villa owner from the play as being a millionaire, the set designer created a suitable European-Asian style villa.

6.2. Lighting Design:

The lighting design concept follows the principles of time periods, situations, and designs based on the characters' emotional states. It balances realism and surrealism in the design. For instance, scenes with mysterious sounds are made louder to reveal each character's guilt as a murderer. The designer and director aim to create lighting that reflects the falling into the abyss of the characters' thoughts, fear, and confusion.



6.3. Costume, Makeup, and Hairstyle Design:

The design is based on the fashion trends of the year 1997, and the characteristics of the characters derived from the play's script. The interpretation and analysis were done collaboratively between the designer and the director, incorporating the analysis data into the actors' proportions to enhance their personalities, beliefs, confidence, and character portrayal. This also considers expressing the characters' emotions through the actors' gestures to avoid obstacles during the performance.



CONCLUSION

From the adaptation and presentation of the play “Karm Payabath” through theater performance in the academic year 2023, it is evident that the directing process is crucial for the presentation of a play. This requires analysis, interpretation, and creative ideas that align with the storyline to communicate the main ideas to the audience effectively. The process involves

selecting actors, rehearsals, creating promotional materials, stage design, and other things. These are essential components in creating a theatrical production regardless of the storyline.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher would like to thank Assistant Professor Dr.Sun Tawalwongsri and all faculty staff of the Department of Theatre Arts and Creative Entrepreneurship for their encouragement. And Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Language Institution, The Research Institution Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for its financial support.

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