

The mask-play behind the politics behind the mask-play

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A smart fusion bar in Silom, just after sundown.

Chuck: I've only been here a short time and I've got a lot invested. I need to understand what's going on but your politics have me flummoxed. You take three elections to form a parliament and then it does nothing. People want to dissolve political parties and write yet another constitution. The prime minister talks in riddles which the press wastes acres trying to interpret. And now he might fall because of a cooking programme. Is this serious?

Chai: Yes, it must be confusing. Maybe you have to know a bit about khon, the mask-play. It's an old dance-drama with actors dressed in masks. Originally it came from a puppet play. The masks and costumes are modeled on puppets. And the actors move like puppets too.

Chuck: So the actors are imitating puppets. And puppets are devices mimicking people. And puppets are manipulated by people you can't see....

Chai: You're beginning to get it.

Chuck: So what's the plot?

Chai: It's the old Indian Ramayana, but we changed it a bit and call it Ramakian. It's a long, long war between an army of monkeys and an army of demons. On one side is the monkey general. He's a frisky fellow who fancies himself as handsome and has several wives. On the other side is the demon king who has magical powers but is greedy and ambitious. They fight an awful lot of battles.

Because they all wear masks, even an ageing cast who all retired or should have retired years ago can get away with it. Or almost get away with it. The fight scenes are a bit limp, but the actors make up for it by shouting even louder and waving their arms more.

Chuck: Fine, fine. I get the point. It's a drama. So is politics everywhere. But what's really happening? Who's pulling the strings?

Chai: In the scene before last, the monkey army pulled off an old trick using some creaky special effects that audiences seems to love. They chased the demons off the stage and buried the demon king under a pile of rocks.

Then the monkeys strutted up and down, leaping and stamping, waving swords and spears, pointing their fingers, striking threatening poses, and generally showing off. The audience loved it for a bit but then got bored with them and booed the monkeys off the stage. The monkey general went off to hide in a cave.

Chuck: So honours even. What next?

Chai: It's not yet clear. The demon king has ten faces and lots of arms which shows that he is very,

very clever. But his faces are all green, which shows that he is very, very evil. Some in the audience love him because he is clever. Others hate him because he is evil. Every time he comes on stage, brawls break out in the audience.

So right now he's been banished from the stage and buried under a pile of rocks. But demons don't die easily, especially demon kings. One by one, he's throwing the rocks off and gradually digging his way out.

The monkeys and the demon king's enemies in the audience don't want to draw attention to this so they are keeping quiet. The demon troops and the demon king's supporters in the audience don't want to celebrate either, so they are pretending not to notice too.

Chuck: So I shouldn't pay too much attention to the daily nonsense in the papers. The real action is off-stage.

Chai: Yes, that's right. We call it dancing behind the curtain. But you also have to pay attention to the sound effects. We in the audience can hear the sound of the rocks being thrown in the air and landing with a great crash offstage. We know the demon king is going to emerge soon. But we don't know what will happen after that. Maybe the monkeys and demons don't know either. That's the tension, the uncertainty, the excitement. Meanwhile, all we can do is listen to the orchestra which is bashing drums and gongs even more frantically than usual trying to distract our attention from the crashing rocks.

Chuck: So what's happening now on the stage?

Chai: Oh, it's a very funny scene, a sort of interlude while the demons and monkeys recover their breath.. There's a big, fat, tired, flat-nosed old monkey who used to be a colonel in the monkey army. He was famous for how loud he could bellow, though he was never much of a fighter. In his old age, he was lured to defect to the demon army. This sort of thing happens a lot. In a mask-play, it's easy to change faces. In the fight scenes it's sometimes hard to work out who's in which army.

Anyway, the point of the scene is that nobody is now sure which side the tired old monkey is on. Perhaps neither side wants him any more. So he is running from side to side of the stage, shooting imaginary arrows at imaginary enemies, pointing his finger a lot, and shouting so loud he sprays the front few rows with saliva. But we know he is old, so we are just waiting for him to get tired. Then they'll take him off.

Chuck: What then?

Chai: Well it might be a battle scene. But again nobody's really sure.

Chuck: How does it all finish up? Is it a happy ending?

Chai: It's not really clear. The demon-king is defeated but then, well, well... I think you'll just have to read it for yourself. Maybe you shouldn't make too much of the ending anyway. It always seems to me that the whole thing takes an awful lot of time, makes an awful lot of noise, and kills off an awful lot of demons and monkeys for nothing.

P.S.

<http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/khon.htm>