

# Interpreting Literary Heritage: “Lilit Phra Law” Through Dance

*as Part of Heritage Interpretation for  
the 21st Century*

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## Abstract

This article explores how literary heritage can be reinterpreted through creative dance to sustain its relevance in the 21st century. It derives from a dissertation-length study entitled “Interpreting Literary Heritage: Lilit Phra Law through Dance as Part of Heritage Interpretation for the 21st Century.” The research employed six methods: literature review, personal experiential analysis, field studies, media exploration, symposium discussions, and structured interviews. Data collection was conducted in Thailand from March 2004 to April 2024, involving performing arts professionals, music and drama academics, senior practitioners from the Office of Performing Arts, the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture, and both Thai and international audiences. The findings propose a conceptual model for adapting dance from literary sources as a form of heritage interpretation, demonstrating how creative dance can contribute to the revitalization and sustainability of Thai performing arts within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Creative Dance, Heritage Interpretation, Thai Performing Arts, Literary Adaptation, Contemporary Choreography, Lilit Phra Law

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## Introduction

Thailand is renowned for its rich and diverse artistic heritage, which continues to fascinate visitors from around the world. This heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible forms. Tangible heritage includes architecture and visual arts, while intangible heritage, as Weeranuj Maithai notes, “comprises oral traditions, languages, music, dance and performing arts, crafts, and customs, including those of minority and indigenous peoples” (Maithai, 2000:17). Like literature and mural painting, these artistic expressions are now recognized as integral components of Thailand’s cultural identity, having developed over centuries and requiring careful preservation for transmission to future generations.

Thai art is characterized by its interconnectedness, where different forms influence and inspire one another. These traditions can be seen as distinct streams flowing into the same cultural river. Music and dance, sculpture and dance, painting and dance – all have evolved in dialogue with one another, while stories from Thailand’s rich oral and literary traditions have profoundly shaped the development of Thai dance.

The origins of storytelling through dance in Thailand are difficult to trace, but evidence suggests that the practice dates back centuries. By the Sukhothai period, when the foundations of modern Thailand were emerging, inscriptions indicate that dance was central to both popular entertainment and ceremonial events for the ruling elites. As Mattani Mojara Rutnin observes, “In the descriptions of state and religious ceremonies in the second part of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, the author notes the freedom to pursue personal pleasure and entertainment in Sukhothai, of which music and dance were the essential parts” (Rutnin, 1996:26).

Similarly, Jukka O. Miettinen highlights that “Thai classical dance is the result of a long development and the fusion of varied cultural elements” (Miettinen, 1992:47-48). Among these traditions, the *Manora* folk tale from Southern Thailand plays a central role. Dhanit Yupho explains that “the plot of the *lakon jatri* was based on the folktale of *Manohra*, abbreviated in the regular southern Thai fashion into ‘*nora*’ or ‘*nora jatri*.’ However, modern *nora jatri* dance dramas now incorporate other stories as well” (Yupho, 1963:75).

Even today, audiences attending dance performances in Thailand – whether classical or contemporary – often seek narrative meaning, underscoring the enduring importance of storytelling in Thai dance. Although Thailand may not be considered a “literary” culture in the strictest sense, stories, many of which were transmitted orally over generations before being recorded, have always held a central role in the performing arts. This deep interconnection demonstrates how the Thai performing arts and storytelling traditions have been shaped by, and have incorporated, cross-cultural influences from other Asian traditions over the centuries.

Despite the richness of this heritage, sustained efforts at the governmental level to develop, promote, or preserve traditional performing arts have been limited. While there have been initiatives aimed at conservation, commercialization, or artistic development, they have achieved only limited success in influencing public perception. As a result, traditional Thai performing arts remain marginalized, and there is a growing concern that, without meaningful intervention, these art forms face the real risk of disappearing before the end of the 21st century.

### Aims of the Research

This study is guided by a central research question and defined research objectives. Its primary aim is to examine the process of reinterpreting literary heritage through dance as a means of supporting heritage interpretation in the 21st century. Specifically, the study seeks to develop conceptual and practical models for the integration of dance and performing arts into strategies for arts and heritage conservation.

Within this framework, the research addresses the guiding question: How can dance and the performing arts be used to reinterpret Thai literary and oral traditions as part of heritage interpretation in the 21st century?

### Scope of Research

This research examines the role of innovative performing arts in the interpretation of literary and oral heritage, using the case study production *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) as its primary focus. The study evaluates this production with the aim of establishing a conceptual framework that supports the integration of performing arts into strategies for literary and oral heritage conservation.

Within this context, the evaluation concentrates on identifying methods for developing appropriate interpretive approaches that respect and preserve the cultural significance of the source material while simultaneously maintaining artistic integrity and creative freedom.

### Assumptions

This research is based primarily on the urban dance production *Lilit Phra Law*, staged in Thailand on 14 January 2005 at the open space in front of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and on 1–2 February 2005 at Hall 5 of the Impact Exhibition Centre as part of the 2005 Thailand Innovations' Day Exhibition. This work was selected because it embodies multiple concerns relevant to creators seeking to engage with literary and broader arts heritage traditions through innovative performing arts practices.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) productions examined in this study represent a medium-scale case involving 30 dancers, demonstrating how resources and performance spaces can be effectively utilized to maximize artistic and interpretive impact. *Lilit Phra Law* is deeply rooted in Thai cultural identity, attributed to an anonymous poet from the early Ayutthaya period, while simultaneously belonging to a broader, universal literary tradition. Its narrative resonates with themes of fate, intergenerational conflict, and tragic love, paralleling timeless stories such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This duality underscores the enduring relevance of the work while raising critical questions regarding how national traditions can be adapted and reinterpreted with authenticity and cultural respect.

For this study, the analysis concentrates on the conceptual framework of adapting literature into dance rather than focusing on the detailed interpretation of individual words or verses. This approach reflects the nature of the production, which was conceived as a dance-based performance rather than a literal, text-driven mime.

## Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods to examine the reinterpretation of literary and oral heritage through creative dance. The research integrated multiple approaches to ensure methodological rigor and academic depth.

The investigation began with archival research conducted at the libraries of the Thai Fine Arts Department, enabling access to extensive local scholarship, expert analyses, and historical resources. Dance-related sources, both Thai and international, that explored adaptations and interpretations of literature through performance were also systematically reviewed.

Personal experience constituted another dimension of the research, involving an in-depth examination of previous work in the artistic and dance fields through the study of video recordings, visual documentation, and printed records. Central to the study was the close analysis of three featured works – *Narai Avatara*, *Phramahachanok*, and *Ngo-Pa* – which formed the primary axis around which other lines of inquiry were developed.

The project also incorporated interviews and participatory observation. In-depth personal and small group interviews were conducted with performing arts professionals, officials from the Fine Arts Department, and both Thai and international audience members to capture diverse perspectives on performance and interpretation.

Further, the research included active engagement in academic symposia and festivals, such as the Southeast Asian Performing Arts Symposium held at Bangkok University in November 2003, the 4th International Symposium on Creative Fine Arts (ISCFA) held at Phranakhon Si Ayutthaya Rajabhat University in 2023, and the International Festival of Arts (IFA) hosted by Srinakharinwirot University in 2024. These academic platforms provided valuable opportunities for comparative discussion and the integration of multiple regional perspectives.

Recognizing that live performance lies at the heart of the performing arts, direct engagement with live productions formed a critical component of the methodology. Observing and analyzing live performances offered insights into the dynamic relationship between creative practice and heritage interpretation. Collectively, these examples establish models demonstrating how innovative performing arts practices can function as active forms of heritage conservation and reinterpretation in contemporary contexts.

## The Lilit Phra Law (2005) Production

The traditional Thai folk narrative of *Phra Law* is closely associated with the northern province of Phrae and remains one of the most celebrated works of Thailand's literary heritage. The story revolves around the tragic fate of *Phra Law*, a handsome young hero, and the two beautiful princesses, *Phra Phuen* and *Phra Phaeng*, who fall deeply in love with him.

At the heart of the narrative lies the rivalry between two royal families from neighboring kingdoms, whose long-standing enmity ultimately drives the events of the story. The tale unfolds against a backdrop of conflict, culminating in tragedy: *Phra Law*, *Phra Phuen*, and *Phra Phaeng* die in each other's arms, surrounded by the loyal servants who also perished in their defense.

The devastating outcome plunges both kingdoms into profound mourning, symbolizing the enduring tension between love, loyalty, and familial duty. This timeless narrative of passion and fate resonates with universal themes, reinforcing *Lilit Phra Law* as a cornerstone of Thai cultural and literary identity and providing a rich source of inspiration for its reinterpretation through dance and performance.



Figure 1. The image depicts Song forces recovering the body of their deceased king in the opening scene, with the intention of restoring him to his rightful kingdom.



Figure 2. The image captures the climactic death scene in the final act, illustrating how the stepped entrance is effectively utilized to produce a visually striking composition designed to leave a lasting impression on the audience.

While the precise origins of the *Phra Law* story remain uncertain, the earliest known written version appears in the *lilit* verse form and is attributed to an anonymous author of the Ayutthaya period. As Thammarong Boonrach explains, “The language of the *lilit* is now

somewhat obscure and not so accessible for contemporary Thai audiences” (interview, April 12, 2024). However, in the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, the original poetic text was intentionally used as the narration. This deliberate decision served to highlight the aesthetic qualities of the poetry, emphasizing its sonic beauty and literary artistry.

By grounding the performance in the authentic source material, the production not only pays tribute to the anonymous author who preserved this traditional narrative but also reanimates the text through dance enactment on stage. This creative integration transforms the poetry into a living experience that resonates with audiences, enabling them to connect more deeply with a work that might otherwise remain linguistically or culturally inaccessible.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production thus illustrates how dance can serve as a powerful medium for exploring and reinterpreting complex literary traditions, especially those that contemporary audiences may find challenging due to linguistic shifts or changes in cultural sensibilities. Notably, the production was performed by a young cast, demonstrating how new generations can engage meaningfully with their heritage. This approach also highlights how creative deployment of diverse resources – from staging and narration to performer training – can maximize the artistic and interpretive potential of a production.

Building upon the insights gained from the analysis of the featured works, this study proposes a conceptual model for adapting dance from literary sources as a method of heritage interpretation. Furthermore, it expands the discussion by considering how dance and the performing arts can be employed as dynamic tools of artistic reinterpretation to sustain and revitalize Thai arts in the 21st century.

### **Suggested Model for the Creative Process of Adapting Dance from Literary Sources as Part of Heritage Interpretation for the 21st Century**

#### **1. Root to Branch: Working with the Text in Performance**

As discussed earlier, when a performance is deeply rooted in its traditional source, it can communicate that heritage from the inside out, even when its external form does not overtly rely on the source text. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate this principle.

In the context of Renaissance theatre, Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp cite John Evelyn’s diary entry from 1645 describing a Venetian performance:

“We went to the Opera, where comedies and other plays are represented in recitative music, by the most excellent musicians, vocal and instrumental...”  
(Clarke & Crisp, 1978:27).

Similarly, in the sphere of new media installations, Wang Shaoqiang explains the interactive work *Fire & Ice*, inspired by Robert Frost’s famous poem:

“Cinimod Studio produced an interactive art installation at West Quay Shopping Centre in Southampton” (Shaoqiang, 2018:102).

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production exemplifies this principle in a Thai context. Its introduction was sung in the traditional vocal style of Nan province, where the story is believed to have originated. This artistic device used the acoustic qualities of the poem and the sung style to immediately draw the audience into the emotive world of the performance, quickly establishing its mood and atmosphere.

Following the opening sequence, however, the remainder of the poem was spoken rather than sung. Traditionally, the original *Phra Law* text is performed in the *lilit* style, which is highly melodic but significantly more time-consuming. By reciting the poem as the accompaniment to the dance performance, the production integrated the entire original text seamlessly into the choreography. This approach allowed the audience to comprehend the narrative meaning while simultaneously experiencing the subtle musicality and aesthetic beauty of the text in full. Such integration fosters deeper audience engagement and can inspire greater interest in the original literary work and its broader cultural context.

These examples collectively demonstrate that working with the original text should not be perceived as a limitation. Instead, it provides a creative platform from which innovative, engaging, and culturally resonant performances can evolve, ensuring that heritage-based artistic practices remain vital and accessible to contemporary audiences.

## 2. Authenticity

For any production seeking to conserve, reinterpret, or raise awareness of traditional heritage, authenticity is a central concern. Grounding the performance in primary traditional sources, while also incorporating subsidiary references to support interpretive decisions, ensures that the production retains a strong sense of cultural integrity and an authentic aesthetic character.

However, it is important to recognize that a performance based entirely on “traditional” forms – adhering strictly to conventional aesthetics and staging – may succeed in demonstrating authenticity but often fails to sustain audience engagement. While an awareness of tradition remains fundamental, innovation is equally vital. Striking a balance between honoring the authentic source and integrating creative techniques allows choreographers to produce performances that both preserve heritage and speak effectively to contemporary audiences.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production demonstrates this principle. In terms of music and narration, the spoken delivery of the original text achieves authenticity while departing from its traditional sung form, thus making the narrative more accessible to modern audiences. Similarly, in the area of costume and visual composition, the production illustrates how modern design elements can be harmonized with heritage markers. While the costumes are contemporary in cut and material, subtle symbolic details – such as wraparound scarves and parasol props – evoke traditional Thai identity and help situate the performance within its cultural context. These choices reflect an informed engagement with subsidiary sources while ensuring that costume design also meets the practical needs of dancers, enabling freedom of movement and expressive clarity.





Figure 3. Contemporary costumes evoke authentic Thai heritage through subtle elements such as wraparound scarves, parasols, and puppetry, effectively situating the narrative while enabling unrestricted movement and indicating that the represented character existed before the main action.

For authenticity to achieve its intended impact as part of heritage interpretation, it must be aesthetic, integrated, and appealing rather than rigidly imposed. In the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, authenticity functions as a seamless dimension of innovation, enhancing the visual power and narrative depth of the work. This approach generates a heightened sense of spectacle capable of attracting wider audiences while avoiding the superficiality often associated with purely commercialized dance productions. By recreating traditional images within a dynamic creative framework, the performance draws attention to the richness of Thai literary and cultural traditions, encouraging audiences to rediscover their value and reaffirming that traditional Thai performances remain worth watching and Thai literature remains worth reading.

### 3. Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Throughout the 20th century, the distinctions between different art forms have become increasingly fluid, leading to a greater degree of cross-disciplinary exchange within the performing and visual arts. As Suwannee Jalanugrasa, a National Artist in Thai traditional dance, noted:

“Thus, my heart was opened wide enough to admire with no prejudice new Thai dance styles resulting from the combination of Thai and Western traditions”  
(Interview, March 29, 2004).

This evolving perspective highlights the integration of diverse artistic practices as a response to shifting cultural contexts. Dance has moved beyond the proscenium stage, increasingly intersecting with visual arts, media installations, and performance environments. For any creation intended to function as a form of heritage conservation, it is crucial to engage with the contemporary arts landscape while also remaining grounded in



cultural authenticity. One effective strategy is adopting a multi-disciplinary approach, combining diverse movement vocabularies such as Western modern dance and Thai folk dance traditions.

Modern dance, widely recognized as a theatrical form distinct from classical ballet, emerged as a radical departure from ballet's structural formalism. As Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell explain:

"Modern dance developed in opposition to classical ballet, rejecting the latter's structural formality and sometimes thematic frivolity. Modern dance pioneers eschewed the rigid hierarchy of ballet in favor of a freer movement style, favoring bare feet over pointe shoes, for example"(Craine & Mackrell, 2000:328).

The early 20th-Century pioneers of modern dance – including Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey – not only revolutionized movement aesthetics but also developed distinct teaching methodologies to support new choreographic techniques.

In contrast, Thai regional folk dances display a rich diversity of stylistic forms:

1. Northern dances (*fon*) are slow and graceful, characterized by simple and harmonious hand, arm, and leg movements.
2. Northeastern dances (*soeng*) employ faster steps and tempo, embodying a lively and celebratory energy.
3. Central Thai folk dances – such as *ram srinuan* and *ram prop kai* – are noted for their refinement and elegance.
4. Southern dances (*ram sat*), particularly the renowned *ram sat charti*, feature fast rhythms and swift hand and leg movements, reflecting influences from Indian and Sri Lankan Kandyen dance traditions.

As Mattani Moj dara Rutnin explains:

"Each of the four regions of Thailand has its own indigenous folk dances, usually associated with agricultural and social activities, such as rice planting, harvesting, festivals, and religious celebrations. The styles of these regional dances are unique to the localities and temperament of the local peoples"  
(Rutnin, 1996:2).

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production demonstrates the creative potential of a multi-disciplinary approach. Here, the stage space operates as a blank canvas, integrating movement, visual composition, music, and design to form a multi-layered performance structure. Through the careful fusion of diverse movement vocabularies, visual arts, and culturally embedded symbols, the production achieves a richer aesthetic dimension and a wider audience appeal while remaining deeply anchored in heritage interpretation.

#### 4. *Appropriate Communication for the Target Audience*

The principal branches of the performing arts – including dance, drama, music, and their various sub-genres – are fundamentally concerned with communication. As Bauman observes:

“In the performing arts, this distinction can be seen in the contrast between composed guidelines or models for artistic presentations, such as playscripts or musical scores, and the presentational rendition of those works before an audience”  
(Bauman, 1992:41).

Furthermore, as Sharpe emphasizes:

“Good interpretation should be entertaining, in order to maintain the interest of an audience”  
(Sharpe, 1985:129–130).

For a performance to effectively convey heritage value or communicate conservation messages, it must engage its target audience with clarity and impact. The performing arts are, by nature, dynamic modes of storytelling, sharing moods, narratives, and teachings through multiple layers of expression. Literature, similarly, communicates meaning through textual richness; however, the performing arts offer creators an expanded sensory and symbolic palette through which those meanings can be interpreted, visualized, and shared. To achieve this, performers and choreographers must consider their audience carefully when developing a production.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, performed by university students at Chulalongkorn University, provides a compelling example. Although designed primarily for an art house audience, the production successfully employed a cohesive combination of sung and spoken text, traditional Thai music, evocative costumes, and choreographic innovation. This integration created a work that was modern and experimental, yet authentic in spirit, making the performance both culturally relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences.

The production also leveraged the distinct technical strengths of its performers to maximize audience engagement. For example, in the cockerel scene, traditional Thai dance techniques were fused with contemporary lifts, heightening the dramatic intensity and visual impact. The image of a skilled female dancer being lifted gracefully by supporting “hunter” dancers created a memorable spectacle and a sense of virtuosic performance quality. These elements demonstrate how technical expertise, combined with innovative staging, can enhance the audience’s emotional and aesthetic experience.

Additionally, the production made deliberate use of ensemble performers to create symbolic scenery, encouraging the audience to reflect more deeply on the narrative and its layered meanings. The multi-sensory composition of movement, sound, and imagery worked together to draw audiences into the world of the story, prompting both performers and spectators to engage critically with its symbolism and cultural resonance.



Figure 4. *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) integrates ballet and contemporary dance techniques, featuring the cockerel dancer's elevation supported by "hunter" dancers, showcasing refined technical skill and dynamic staging to create an impactful display of contemporary virtuosity.

Designed to appeal to university students and arts connoisseurs, *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) adopted a suggestive dance-theatre style, merging traditional Thai aesthetics with contemporary choreographic practices. This experimental format demonstrates that innovation and authenticity need not exist in opposition. On the contrary, high production values and thoughtful creative strategies can amplify the communicative power of the performance while preserving the integrity of the literary source.

### 5. Living Heritage

The narrative of *Phra Law*, with its striking parallels to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, represents a timeless story embedded within both Thai and universal literary traditions. However, works of this nature can present a particular challenge: when audiences are already familiar with the plot, they may engage less deeply with its symbolic meanings and underlying messages. As Alpin observes:

"It should be possible to paint such information in a positive light and impart it without overt attempts at pure entertainment, provided the visitor's interest is gained and maintained" (Alpin, 2002:42).

This insight highlights the unique potential of the performing arts to reinvigorate audience engagement with heritage literature, helping viewers reconnect with themes of wisdom, morality, and human experience that transcend time.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production exemplifies this capacity by using contemporary performance strategies to highlight the enduring relevance of traditional narratives. As Vijjuta Vudhaditya reflected:

“The more ‘new age’ predominantly black costumes and contemporary and ballet-influenced choreography constantly remind the audience that the performance is not confined to a particular time, but is so relevant now” (interview, May 5, 2024).

By integrating modern costuming, innovative staging, and contemporary choreographic vocabularies, the production communicates that *Phra Law* is not a relic of the past, but a living narrative that resonates strongly with present-day audiences. The approach bridges temporal and cultural divides, inviting viewers to interpret the story’s themes – particularly those concerning love, loyalty, conflict, and reconciliation – within the context of their own lives.

The performance’s final scene is especially significant, leaving audiences with not merely a striking visual image, but also one of profound symbolic value. Through its composition, the scene emphasizes the destructive consequences of sustaining old enmities, reinforcing the narrative’s timeless moral relevance.

When a performance successfully establishes, deepens, or renews the connection between audience and source, it fulfills one of the key aims of heritage interpretation: demonstrating that traditional works remain vital and meaningful within contemporary society. For performing arts engaged in heritage conservation, this ability to make the past speak powerfully to the present is essential in ensuring that cultural narratives continue to live, evolve, and inspire.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dance and the performing arts can serve as powerful tools for reinterpreting Thai literary and oral traditions within the framework of heritage interpretation in the 21st century. Through an in-depth analysis of the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, the research proposes five interrelated models for employing dance and performance in heritage conservation:

1. Root to Branch – anchoring performances in authentic textual sources while expanding creative expression through innovative staging.
2. Authenticity – integrating cultural integrity into the creative process while allowing space for contemporary reinterpretation.
3. Multi-Disciplinary Approach – combining diverse movement vocabularies, visual arts, and music to construct dynamic performance frameworks.
4. Appropriate Communication for the Target Audience – tailoring the aesthetic and interpretive strategies to ensure accessibility and audience engagement.
5. Living Heritage – demonstrating how traditional narratives remain relevant to contemporary social and cultural contexts.

As discussed, the reinterpretation of traditional arts for new generations remains an area of research that has received limited scholarly attention. By addressing this gap, the study

provides both a conceptual framework and practical insights for sustaining and revitalizing Thai performing arts in a rapidly evolving cultural environment.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the urgent need to raise public awareness of Thailand's artistic heritage and to foster a renewed appreciation of traditional literature, performance practices, and cultural narratives. By positioning the performing arts as dynamic agents of cultural continuity, this research contributes to heritage preservation while simultaneously encouraging innovation that resonates with contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, this study positions dance as both a conservator and innovator of cultural heritage, demonstrating its capacity to revitalize traditional narratives while simultaneously shaping new artistic expressions. By integrating insights from *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) with broader choreographic trends identified by Chandnasaro (2025:59–60), the findings highlight how Thai performing arts can remain vibrant, adaptive, and relevant in an increasingly interconnected world.

Heritage-based performances must therefore be approached not as static relics, but as living, evolving practices capable of resonating with diverse audiences while honoring cultural origins. Through this dual role, dance emerges as a transformative medium, bridging the past, present, and future while ensuring that Thailand's rich artistic legacy continues to inspire, educate, and thrive on both local and international stages.

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