

About Khon

Text/ Victor Ma

Ma is a Hong Kong dancer, choreographer and director, and the Artistic Director of Y-Space.

About Khon is the joint creation of renowned Thai classical dance master Pichet Klunchun and French avant-garde provocateur Jérôme Bel. The 2003 Hong Kong Arts Festival presented his piece *The Show Must Go On*. However, it was neither understood nor appreciated by the Hong Kong audience.

On Jérôme Bel's defense, his works emphasize on being plainly meticulous. Being the antithesis to extravaganza, his works had always been suffused with doubts towards the essence of dance and performing. In his second work *Jérôme Bel*, four naked performers of various physical shapes came on stage. There were no leaps or somersaults, just simple daily movements. Illuminated solely by a small light bulb, the only music accompaniment is the humming of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* by the performers. The simplicity offers plenty of room for thought. Yet, those audiences accustomed to lavish dance numbers left the performance early. In his 1997 creation *Shirtology*, performers take off one T-shirt after another, denoting the T-shirt culture and the influence of the pop culture. The work poignantly highlights Bel's wisdom, sense of *au courant*, and sly humour. In the 2003 Hong Kong Arts Festival, *The Show Must Go On*, using a string of pop hit ballads, is an intimate exploration on the expectation of the audience. At a specified time, the audience bought tickets and came to this pitch dark theatre-what do they anticipate? What elicited feelings do they crave for? People may be bitterly disappointed if they were expecting whimsical dance moves. Bel was dissatisfied with this work after a string of negative reviews, and eventually removed it from his own repertoire.

As presented by the 2008 New Vision Arts Festival, *About Khon* was developed out of the collaborative work from 2005 (*Pichet Klunchun and Myself*) when Bel was invited to Thailand by Classical dance artist Pichet Klunchun. The content consists of demonstrating the Thai traditional dance Khon. As a choreographic documentary of sorts, the two artists discoursed and deliberated on a number of topics involving dance and the gap between the two abysmally different cultures. The show raised questions about theatrical and choreographic traditions of France and Thailand, and the collision between the ancient and modern dance forms. *Khon* dance is an art form that lasted centuries. In earlier times, *Khon* was solely presented towards the king, royalties and guests. It was notable for the masks worn by the dancers. Adorned in lavish costumes, there would also be live music and narrator. It was not until the establishment of Thailand's National Theatre that the art form was accessible by the public. Klunchun studied and performed *Khon* for more than twenty years. As a prominent *Khon* dancer, he agonized over the declining popularity of this traditional dance, and it being denigrated as novelty entertainment for tourists. Such topics formed the conversation between him and Bel, who also shared on his own artistic practices. The talk was witty yet poignant, and inspiring to the audience. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* was performed in cities and arts festivals around the world. It accumulated nearly 100 performances with audiences exceeding 20,000.

About Khon is the progressive collaboration between the two artists and the continuation of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*. The classical *Khon* dance is revitalized from past to present, made relevant to present audience. To see Klunchun's performance is pure enjoyment. His virtuoso and lucid movements, coupled with the nuanced yet confident interpretation, demonstrated his passion towards *Khon*. Bel's insights in *About Khon* are also visceral. *About Khon* is a quintessential reflection towards dance, performance and culture. In the programme notes of *About Khon*, Klunchun said: "We are not Thai when our culture is lost."

Translated by Richard Li

About Khon by Pichet Klunchun (Thailand), Jérôme Bel (France) and
Pichet Klunchun Dance Company (Thailand)

Time: November 21st to 22nd, 2008 (Friday to Saturday) 20:00

(Post-performance talk after each performance)