



Communities of Imagination: Contemporary Southeast Asian Theatres

Catherine Diamond

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Asian theatre is usually studied from the perspective of the major traditions of China, Japan, India, and Indonesia. Now, in this wide-ranging look at the contemporary theatre scene in Southeast Asia, Catherine Diamond shows that performance in some of the lesser known theatre traditions offers a vivid and fascinating picture of the rapidly changing societies in the region. Diamond examines how traditional, modern, and contemporary dramatic works, with their interconnected styles, stories, and ideas, are being presented for local audiences. She not only places performances in their historical and cultural contexts, but also connects them to the social, political, linguistic, and religious movements of the last two decades.

Each chapter addresses theatre in a different country and highlights performances exhibiting the unique conditions and concerns of a particular place and time. Most performances revolve in some manner around “contemporary modernity,” questioning what it means—for good or ill—to be a part of the globalized world. In addition, chapters are grouped by three general and overlapping themes. The first, which includes Thailand, Vietnam, and Bali, is defined by the increased participation of women in the performing arts—not only as performers, but also as playwrights and directors. Cambodia, Singapore, and Myanmar are linked by a shared concern with the effects of censorship on theatre production. A third group, the Philippines, Laos, and Malaysia, is characterized by their focus on nationalism: theatres are either contributing to official versions of historical and political events or creating alternative narratives that challenge those interpretations.

Communities of Imagination shows the many influences of the past and how it continues to affect cultural perceptions. It addresses major trends, suggesting why they have developed and why they are popular with the public. It also underscores how theatre continues to attract new practitioners and reflect the changing aspirations and anxieties of societies in immediate and provocative ways even as it is being marginalized by television, film, and the internet. The book will be of interest to students and scholars of theatre and performance, Asian literature, Southeast Asian studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. Travelers who view attending local performances as important to their experience abroad will find it an essential reference to theatres of the region.

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