

Twins of Siamese Theatre

By FAUBION BOWERS

THE ingenious burlesque of Siamese dancing Jerome Robbins introduced with his "Small House of Uncle Tom" ballet in "The King and I" did the art in Thailand a good service. I don't think anyone who saw the New York performance and who finds himself here in the home of the original misses a visit to the Silapakorn Theatre, a long barnlike rectangle on the edge of the University grounds surrounded by Buddha heads, peepul trees, and snake sculptures, and the only place where Siamese dancing can be seen regularly. While these performances are deeply serious and differ from the Broadway version in several ways, they are still thoroughly enjoyable. At any performance you can see a sprinkling of "The King and I"-whetted foreigners approving and applauding the dancers who move about the stage in sparkling paillette-studded blouses, with skirts of off-color, shot silks, and crowned with golden, spired headdresses.

Those of us who have spent any time in Thailand, however, are apt to find our chief pleasure not so much in the Silapakorn Theatre's dance performances but in Likay, the popular theatre and the country's oldest drama form. Until about 200 years ago all theatre here consisted of dance or dance-dramas the themes of which were exclusively religious—the exploits of Buddha, or the heroics of the Hindu religious epics which are as familiar to a Siamese as they are to the Hindus themselves—and these dancing troupes were for the most part confined to the royal family or princes of wealth. When Likay started at this time the theatrical life of Thailand altered substantially. The dance element, with its archaicisms and inviolated symbology, was pared down to a minimum and story and plot were emphasized. The performers became actors, in that they spoke their own lines (instead of silently dancing out the words sung by the chorus in the orchestra) and enacted emotions and situations more or less realistically. The shift in subject matter was from religion to history, from gods to kings, from the divine to the human, and once human beings started appearing the common man too found his way into the themes.

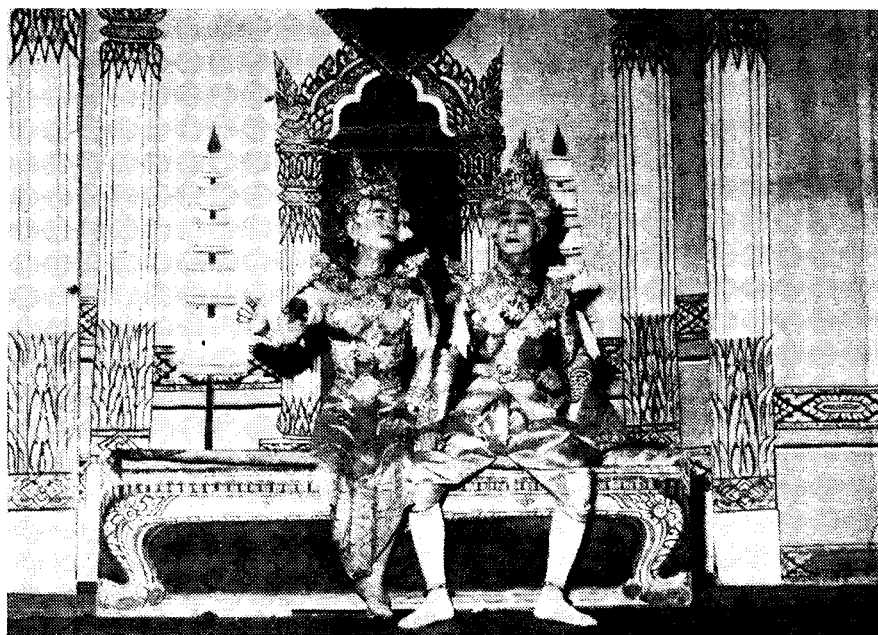
Now that Likay is already 200 years old, it still seems classical, stylized, full of conventions, and a little artificial, but its hold over the people has remained in full force, and it is likely that it will be another 200 years before this style will burn itself out and become too remote from contemporary audiences to continue being popularly supported. At the moment in Bangkok alone there are about twenty Likay theatres, each performing night after night to audiences jammed into hard, uncomfortable seats and who sit enthralled for hours on end. If you wonder where the Siamese go in the evenings when the cluttered jumble of city traffic disappears and the streets of Bangkok mysteriously turn deserted and ghostly, the answer probably is to the Likay.

It is a mildly dangerous thing to develop a taste for Likay. The chauffeur of a friend of mine was so taken by it that he went every night, non-stop, for six months and was fired (his employer had no one to drive him to the Likay and it would not have been socially correct for them to go together). When his money ran out he started working again, and for the time being has given up the theatre. Another acquaintance of mine cannot go to sleep unless he sees Likay or at least listens for half an hour to the special radio perform-

ances broadcast regularly from 10 to 10:30 in the evening. The actors and playwrights encourage this habit-forming aspect of their dramas by serializing them and unfolding the plot and sub-plots in instalments. I have just finished following the latest Likay, a play called "The Red-Silk Bandit," and it took us just about a week before it turned out that the bandit—always masked with a red silk scarf—was actually a very strong-minded and masculine woman.

LIKAY is comparable a little to musical comedy. There is always music—the orchestra of bamboo xylophones, leather drums, and ivory horns sits in full view on the stage—and entrances and exits, battles, sentimental scenes of tears and love and departures always must be accompanied by specific compositions to heighten the dramatic effect of the action. Sometimes, I think, the music also starts up whenever the orchestra gets bored or wants a particular act of the play to finish. Likay also must have passages and interludes of dancing. Kings and queens always dance on and off the stage (at the start of their first appearance they bow to the audience formally in the Siamese greeting of hands pressed together with the thumbs at their nose), and every actor of the troupe is supposed to be able to dance even if his particular part does not specifically call for a dance sequence. Every actor has to sing, too.

There is always a fine mixture of humor and seriousness, and, inevitably, the positive, happy conviction that right triumphs, wickedness gets punished, and goodness ultimately



Two old male Likay stars (actor playing the queen is on the left).

finds its proper rewards. Likay has, too, other strict, classical conventions. The majority of the spoken lines and all the words of the songs must be improvised on the spot in a special, unvarying meter, and the phrases must rhyme. This is of course extremely difficult to do, and sometimes the rules take precedence over the sense, but more often you find the actor creating a charming and natural poetry which seems all the more impressive because of its spontaneous inventiveness. In theory and according to tradition all the roles are performed by men, and today some of the best artists of the Likay stage are old men in their sixties who still excel as regal heroines. "The Red Silk Bandit" was something of a trick, since it was as unexpected to have a bandit turn out to be a woman as it was to have the Likay actor turn out to be a real, live woman. But the tendency recently is to use more and more women on the stage. Nowadays, sometimes, modern women in below-the-knee-length skirts and old-fashioned blouses appear onstage along with the older, more classically dressed actors playing other female roles. Curiously enough, these latter often act with far more femininity and delicacy of gesture than their actual female counterparts.

Despite its long theatrical heritage and its firm, unshakable roots in the minds and feelings of the Siamese people, Likay is a changing art. One of the most striking evidences of this is shown by the enormous interest the government now, within the last year or so, is taking in it. Because of its hold over the people, Likay offers a ready-made outlet for propaganda and the dissemination of government information.

Shortly before U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma, paid Thailand his recent, formal State visit all Likay dealing with the Burmese wars were banned. This has been something of a blow for the actors, because the best plays in the repertoire have since the beginning of Likay exploited this theme. Much of Thailand's history has been the story of depredating Burmese invading the country, seizing bits of its territory, sacking the capital, and carrying off slaves, women, and even certain of the arts (Burmese puppets originally came from Thailand). These historical incidents naturally provided Likay with an inexhaustible number of dramatic possibilities. However, much as Likay may be affected for the moment, one thing I am certain of: there is enough vitality and genuine theatrical artistry in the Likay form and in the excellent actors that perform it to outlast this loss of part of its repertoire.

How to Beat Low-Frequency Noise

By R. S. LANIER

LOW-FREQUENCY noise is a sneaky culprit that can steal away the fidelity of a sound system from under your nose. It comes from rumble or vibration in the turntable or tape transport mechanism. If the turntable, for instance, has any kind of shake in its motion, this can swing the stylus of the pickup back and forth, sending heavy voltages into the amplifier. These spurious voltages are often much stronger than the voltages representing the speech or music.

The progress of high fidelity has made low-frequency noise more of a problem today than it was a few years ago. Low-frequency noise often makes itself evident as a heavy rumbling sound, but sometimes you don't hear the worst of it. The heaviest noise can be at frequencies below the response range of the ear, say at ten or fifteen cps; or at least, too low for the loudspeaker to make it audible as sound, say below twenty-five cps. Practically no loudspeakers will come up with any audible sound from a voltage lower than twenty-five cps.

Thus, you can have a drive system that produces no audible rumble, but nevertheless is sending in to your amplifier tremendous spurious voltages. Your ears can't get them but the amplifier can be knocked off its feet by them.

If you can't hear it, how do you know when you have it? Suppose your system has a tendency to distort music which you have not been able to pin on the pickup, amplifier, or speaker. To find out if inaudible noise could be the cause, take the grille off your loudspeaker and put a *very* light finger on the speaker cone while a record is being played. If the cone flutters in and out haphazardly, or vibrates strongly without any apparent connection with the music, you have probably got a bad case of noise.

To look for the noise, put your fingertips lightly on the motor board at various points, on the center pin of the turntable, and on the base of the pickup arm, which will make evident to you any strong vibration. Turn the bass control on your amplifier all the way over to the "cut" position, to see if the fluttering and the distortion are reduced.

If you *have* got inaudible noise trouble, the cure is fairly simple and cheap. You need a filter between your

pickup or tape head and your amplifier, which cuts the bass frequencies, beginning at twenty-five cps and going down the scale. If your loudspeaker is not of the big horn-loaded type that actually reproduces down to thirty cps or so, the filter can go higher. In other words, you should keep out of your amplifier any bass frequencies that you cannot use in the reproduction of music.

A number of high-fidelity amplifiers now provide such a low-cut filter, usually with adjustable cut-off points, such as twenty-five cps, forty cps, etc. If you happen to be the make-it-yourself type, you can put a filter on your system at the cost of three or four very inexpensive parts. Designs are given in audio handbooks. We can just about pass a rule that a bass-cut filter will improve the sound quality of any system.

If the rumble in your system is strongly audible, you have a choice of cures, depending on the state of your budget for high fidelity and on the intensity of your desire to hear very low bass notes. Cure 1, by far the more expensive, consists in getting a more refined drive system which does not rumble audibly, and then proceeding with a bass-cut filter at about twenty-five cps as described above.

Cure 2 is to abandon enough of the bass response of your system to get rid of the rumble, depending on the filter for the whole job. For instance, many moderately good turntables have considerable rumble in the region around thirty cps. You can get rid of this, and of course of the inaudible rumble at lower frequencies, with a filter that cuts at forty or forty-five cps. This of course cuts any music below this point too. But you will have good bass to forty-five or fifty cps, and music is perfectly satisfying with such a response, if the high end is in balance.

If the audible rumble is at a higher frequency, say at sixty or sixty-five cps, you need a filter which begins to cut at about seventy cps, and you may or may not feel that this eliminates more of the music than you are willing to lose. If it is too drastic for you, a more refined turntable is the only recourse. It is a question of cost in each case: how much bass, in the form of turntable refinement, are you willing to buy? But don't make the mistake of buying more bass than your loudspeaker will reproduce!