

# ***Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scenes): The Erotic Performances in Thai Classical Dance<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

“*Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scene)” is a part of performance in Thai classical dance which is reflected through royal and local traditions. This love scene is a part of literature, poems, and fairy tales that depicts sexual activity (sexual intercourse) of two or more dancers. Such dancers express feeling of love or lust amongst them. An erotic scene is a special part that creates pleasure in Thai classical dance. This is also called “*Khao Phra –Khao Nang*” (Phra is male and Nang is female) in traditional Thai classical dance. An erotic scene is not limited to any particular type of drama; it can be included in Thai classical dance wherever appropriate, depending on the main plot. Mostly, an erotic scene is common in *Lakhon Nok*, which features all male dancers. The gestures of such performances are likely to be more realistic, playful, and provocative than those of *Khon* (mask dance) or *Lakhon Nai*. Movements in erotic scenes are known as “*Khao Kiew*” or “*Kiewparasee*” (flirting) which are applied through simple gestures such as cheek touching, chin raising, shoulder embracing, hand and foot touching. These movements are adapted to be more charming and smooth in Thai classical dance. Music for this scene is *Pleng Na Patt*, so-called “*Lom*” and “*Tranon*”. This is the main music used for erotic scenes, in which *Lom* implies foreplay actions between dancers prior to sexual activity, while *Tranon* implies the moment after intercourse. Nowadays, stage lighting design is used to illustrate erotic scenes effectively;

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lights will be dimmed during sleep or curtains will be closed, implying that dancers already have had sexual activity, proceeding to the next scene.

**Keywords:** *Bot Āścarya*; Erotic scene; Thai classical dance; Performing arts; Sexual intercourse

## Introduction

The art of Thai classical dance are body movements that depicts Thai culture and identity. Apparently, dancing is an integral part of Thai society. To study the origins of Thai classical dance and factors that influence these performances, one needs to understand its history. There are many public traditional dance performances, most of them organized by Fine Arts Departments or universities. Such performances are appreciated by all generations for relaxation or entertainment purposes.

Most academicians and artists believe that literature, local stories, or fairy tales influence contents or concepts of Thai classical dance. Key characteristics of dancers in such fables might be different or similar. These include humans, demons, or animals that show supernatural actions or powers, which are not common nowadays. Poets have applied various styles of writing and idioms to convey stories through words. All of them promote imagination of readers, thus leading to appreciation, impression, sadness, and excitement.

The key attribute of erotic scenes in Thai classical dance is the expression of love among dancers. Such passion creates excitement and highlights the main content of the scene. Academicians in the art of Thai classical dance call erotic scenes “*Khao Phra – Khao Nang*” (*Phra* is male and *Nang* is female) according to love expression of dancers, in terms of body touch, as well as sexual activity. In literature, poems, or modern drama, such a love expression is called “*Bot Āscarya*”. Royal Thai classical dance such as *Khon* (mask dance), *Lakhon Nai* requires certain movements properly designed to effectively portraying realistic contents of erotic scenes without being too provocative. “Applying erotic scenes in performances need to consider traditions and norms; *Lakhon Nok* is likely to allow more love expression than *Lakhon Nai*. It is assumed that dancers of *Lakhon Nok* are all males, so they are more likely to express feelings freely” (Klinchan, Interview, February 3, 2015). Based on such assumptions, it is widely known that erotic scenes in Thai classical dance is more common in *Lakhon Nok*, and that it is the uniqueness of *Lakhon Nok* to feature seductive or words with double meaning. Moreover, the performance is not neatly groomed; instead, the story is presented quick and straightforward. The movements of an all-male cast

also create an entertaining and humorous atmosphere, thus reducing tension or rudeness of the erotic scene, leaving only enjoyment for the audience.

There are a lot of novels, poems, or fairy tales featuring love stories or “*Bot Āścarya* (erotic scene)” in Thai classical dance, such as *Ramakien* (also known as *Rāmāyaṇa*), *Kraithong*, *Khun Chang – Khun Phaen*, *Phra Lor*, etc. The story of *Phra Lor* (a *Lakhon Phan Thang*) is an outstanding example of Thai classical dance, clearly expressing erotic scenes of *Phra Lor*, and *Phra Phuen – Phra Phaeng*. The verse of *Phra Lor* is impressive as it creates imagination among audiences. The movements of Thai classical dancing promote the beauty of erotic scenes to be more brilliant and unique, without provocation. This kind of art is different from other performing arts such as movie or drama, which depict much more realistic erotic scenes.

Most articles about Thai classical dance deal with history and tradition of weapons, single moves or sequences. However, very few are about eroticism. As the writers of this article, aim to share knowledge in this field, which dance artists have gained over a long period of time. The writers have synthesized relevant information gained from documents, textbooks, and interviews with specialists in Thai classical dance. Key objective is to share knowledge from classical and modern Thai dance in various contexts. The main contents of this article is divided into many aspects to further understanding as follows:

### **Definition of “*Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scene)”**

“*Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scene)” is common among academicians in literature. However, among artists in Thai classical dance, its definition is unclear. Such a key term should be explained more clearly, in order to promote common understanding. *Bot Āścarya* in movies or theater dramas may be presented differently, compared to the way it is done in Thai classical dance.

Kularb Mallikamas (1973, 201) explained “love scene between genders is called *Bot Āścarya*. Mostly demonstrated as symbols, it is the concept that draws much interest of artists. Erotic scenes are straightforwardly expressed in many stories such as *Lilit Phra Lor* and etc.”

Supanee Patthong (2009, 215), “*Bot Āścarya* is a depiction of sexual activity between male and female by using symbols or representatives. This is to artistically create imagination and express emotions of love.”

Pleung Na Nakorn (1962, 5), “*Bot Āścarya* depicts love but it is difficult to frankly express such feelings about sexual intercourse, so erotic scenes are created to demonstrate the emotion.”

Suchart Pongpanich (1974, 5) “*Bot Āścarya* refers to a love scene which applies symbols to express feelings. Sex symbols refer to representatives of sex activity or sexual intercourse of actors.”

ML. Boonlua Debyasuvarn explained that:

*Bot Āścarya* refers to the demonstration of sexual activities and feelings of actors by using symbols. Such demonstration refers to the process of intercourse to orgasm of actors, including foreplay, flirting, resistance, and expression of satisfaction towards sexual desire. These are key factors of sexual intercourse. (Pongpanich, 1974, 45-46)

Suchart Pongpanich shared interesting perspectives about erotic scenes as follows:

Sexual intercourse, with or without the word “*Āścarya*”, is called *Bot Āścarya* and is derived from *Lilit Phra Lor*. In Ayudhya Era, the song “*Lilit Phra Lor*” used the word “*Āścarya*” for the first time.

In early Rattanakosin Era, during the reign of The King *Phra Buddha Lertlah Napalai*, this word also exists in Inao, Ramakien (also known as *Rāmāyaṇa*), etc. It is widely known that poets used the word “*Āścarya*” to represent “sexual intercourse” or “sexual activity”. (Pongpanich, 1974, 57)

Apparently, *Bot Āścarya* relates to sexual activities between male and female, conveyed through verse. The objective is to create an imagination among listeners and those who study literature to understand the feelings of poets as much as possible. However, engagement in *Bot Āścarya* is different based on the experiences of audiences. Obviously, an understanding of *Bot*

*Āścarya* among children is relatively low. With more experience and age, such understanding raises awareness. Key contents of *Bot Āścarya* are metaphors that effectively refer to nature or objects, representing humans and their movements. Supanee Patthong has shared an example here:

The way a poet refers to a boat and an oar to represent sexual intercourse has influenced poems during the Rattanakosin Era. Poets normally refer to “boat” to represent females and “oar” to represent males in the context of ocean and waves. These symbols create imagination about a relationship that both genders are interdependent; a boat is useless without an oar, and vice versa.

Use of boats to represent sexual activity is prevalent in literatures in the Rattanakosin Era, for instance, *Nirās Myanmar Ti Tha Dindaeng* (or *Myanmar Journal at Tha Dindaeng*) demonstrates *Bot Āścarya* by using sounds of cadence beating oarsmen to show how a poet expresses love as a symbol of sexual relationship. (Patthong, 2009, 217)

Wanthanee Muangboon has shared perspectives about *Bot Āścarya* in Thai classical dancing as follows:

*Bot Āścarya* is a love scene of sexual intercourse of dancers. However, straightforward erotic scenes in traditional Thai classical dance is not practical, unlike in the movies, where dancers can express passion and love. In Royal Thai classical dance, *Bot Āścarya* applies to flirting (as the movements of male and female dancers, which express love, and who are about to have sexual intercourse). There are many patterns of flirting, depending on types of dance performances. (Muangboon, interview, January 28, 2015)

Dharakorn Chandnasaro (interview, April 11, 2015) shared that “*Bot Āścarya* in Thai classical dance is the scene that demonstrates sexual relationship of dancers. The scenes are perfectly conveyed through movements that compare sex with surroundings without using direct communication. Movements are mostly about dancers sitting together”.

In conclusion, “*Bot Āścarya*” in Thai classical dance refers to a scene based on poems, literature, or fairy tales that demonstrates sexual intercourse of two or more dancers. Such dancers are expressing emotions of love and lust. *Bot Āścarya* is a unique scene in Thai classical dance as it promotes feelings of completeness and entertainment. Mostly, erotic scenes in Thai classical dance are presented in *Lakhon Nok*, which features all male cast, probably because male dancers are not likely to be shy while performing. Furthermore, scripts of *Lakhon Nok* are likely to be more straightforward, playful, and fun, somehow provocative. Therefore, *Bot Āścarya* is very common in body movements of *Lakhon Nok*. In comparison, *Lakhon Nai* includes *Bot Āścarya* in different ways, based on unique traditions and approaches, thus worth studying in the future.

### ***Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scene) in Thai classical dance**

Unlike in other types of dance arts, where *Bot Āścarya* may be presented openly, Thai classical dance is highly influenced by cultural norms and traditions. Direct presentation of *Bot Āścarya* is out of question in Thai classical dance. This concept corresponds to the view of Wanthanee Muangboon:

*Bot Āścarya* in Thai classical dance can be seen from simple movements of dancers, i.e. when a dancer is about to lay on top of another, facing towards audiences, it leads to the imagination of dancers and audiences that the next scene is of sexual activity. Practically, dancers are not likely to perform any action to show sexual action, but remain in the position, while turning their backs to the audiences. This is how *Bot Āścarya* is expressed in Royal Thai classical dance. (Muangboon, interview, January 28, 2015)

Erotic scenes in Thai classical dance based on songs require scripts to determine dance movements. There are two typical ways; firstly, movements of flirtation given in the text of the song, secondly, dancers’ movements are not influenced by the song, i.e. dancers are free in the flirting sequence. In any case, the male dancer is trying to touch the female dancer’s body in a sitting position, from head to face, cheek, chin, shoulder, breast, and waist respectively.

In some songs, poets compose verses by using metaphors to demonstrate sexual desire. However, when these songs are used for Thai classical dance, they have to be illustrated in a most discreet way; for most experts and artists believe in the aesthetic perspective that erotic scenes should not be openly presented.

Commonly, Thai classical dance consists of three parts, which are interdependent: music, movements and lyrics. Every scene in Thai classical dance requires many relevant factors. Thai classical dance trainees should utilize capabilities and talents to perform, based on their expertise. Performers of *Bot Āścarya* in Thai classical dance are commonly trained to study dance movements from teachers on a one-to-one basis. However, such movements are systematically arranged and trainees cannot ignore pre-determined processes. Movements of *Bot Āścarya* in training class start from head, face, shoulder, body, and waist respectively. During performances, however, *Bot Āścarya* can start from any part of body, depending on the purpose of a choreographer in designing movements. Dance moves have to correspond to main content of the song.

### **The Essence of *Bot Āścarya* (Erotic scene)**

Key concepts of *Bot Āścarya* in Thai classical dance are as follows:

“*Khao Kiew*” or “*Kiewparasee*” (flirting) is one of the movements in Thai classical dancing. Flirting varies by types of drama. For example, flirting in *Lakhon Nai* is different from *Lakhon Nok*, or *Lakhon Phan Thang* is different from *Lakhon Sepha*. For flirting in *Lakhon Sepha*, *Khun Chang – Khun Phaen*, dancers will demonstrate *Bot Āścarya* with obvious contact among dancers, focusing on actual or natural presentation and less on attractiveness or gentleness of movements. However, key scenes of *Bot Āścarya* which present touching of dancers are not actual touching but illusive angles. Common actions that dancers use to present provocative touching include chin raising, cheek touching, two-hand pushing, hugging, lap rubbing, finger pleating around breast, and turning right hand of male dancer up, across breast of female dancer. These gestures are the symbolic actions of dancers that imply sexual intercourse.

Music commonly used for *Bot Āścarya* is “*Pleng Na Patt*”, including “*Lom*” and “*Tranon*”. Both songs are used for *Khon* and *Lakhon* in Thailand.

Key point is that during the song “*Lom*” played by the band, dancers will demonstrate foreplay actions such as chin raising, cheek touching, hugging, two-hand pushing, etc. During the song “*Tranon*”, dancers prepare for sleeping, implying that sexual intercourse is about to commence. This is the scene derived from natural actions of people. However, there is no movement during the song “*Tranon*” that demonstrate sexual symbols, but unique dance movements, focusing on elegance of gestures. When dancers face towards audiences, the scene implies that they prepare for sexual activity. When dancers turn their backs to audiences, however, the scene implies that sexual action ends and that the next scene is coming.

In addition, during the song “*Tranon*”, when the female dancer lies down in front of male dancer, it implies that intercourse is about to begin, based on the main content of the lyrics. For the song “*Lom*”, gestures of dancers are similar to foreplay, which provokes dancers to have sensual activity, though not intercourse. Moreover, “*Lom* and *Tranon* are not dependent, sometimes, only *Lom* is used for featuring *Bot Āścarya*.” (Muangboon, interview, January 28, 2015)



**Figure 1** Flirting between male dancer and female dancer in Thai classical dancing (*Khao Kiew* or *Kiewparasee* featuring *Pleng Na Patt* “*Lom*”)



**Figure 2** Flirting between male dancer and female dancer in Thai classical dancing (*Khao Kiew* or *Kiewparasee* featuring *Pleng Na Patt* “*Lom*” and “*Tranon*”)  
**Source:** Photos by Narong Cumanee, performers of Artist of Fine Arts Department

### Summary

Regarding the tradition of Royal Thai classical dance, an essential factor that highly influences performances is “*Bot Āścarya*” which refers to gestures of dancers based on literature or poems. Such movements are mainly about foreplay and sexual intercourse between two humans, or between two demons. However, in some stories, there is sexual intercourse between humans and demons as well. As are writers, perceive that such an unrealistic sexual activity is of supernatural nature. Such strange relationships can cause the birth of new character dancer who possess special abilities, for instance, showing superpowers and/or an ability to fly, depending on the main contents of the story. There are many performances of Thai classical dance, conveying messages from stories to audiences by synchronizing melodies and lyrics with body movements. Metaphor is used to create imagination and understanding

amongst audiences and to minimize obvious presentation of sexual scenes which are not clearly exposed and acceptable in Thai' society.

Movements of *Bot Āścarya* in actual Thai classical dance are different from those in training classes, where gestures are taught in a standardized way, arranging processes of flirting (*Khao Kiew* or *Kiewparasee*) from top to lower body. For example, movements start from two-hand pushing, to cheek touching, chin raising, hand pushing, and lap rubbing. On the other hand, in actual Thai classical dance performances, movements of *Bot Āścarya* are designed by a choreographer, where flirting gestures of male dancers and female dancers, so called "*Khao Phra – Khao Nang*" (*Phra* is male and *Nang* is female), are not systematically performed. Flirting normally starts when the female dancer pushes the male dancer's hand away from her shoulder and next gestures depending on the script. There are a lot of flirting gestures, including hand pushing, kissing, cheek touching, chin raising, hugging, lap rubbing, etc. Moreover, some gestures can make flirting realistic such as hand touching, kissing, hand kissing, male dancer rubbing hand of female dancer. These are flirting movements applied in Thai classical dance, which are different from the ones taught in training in classes.

A song commonly used for flirting is *Pleng Na Patt "Lom"* (foreplay with love). Recently, however, there are many more songs that, with their lyrics, may be used for flirting scenes instead of the song *Lom*.

Male dancers and female dancers of Thai classical dance will be trained to perform flirting scenes by raising imagination in audiences that sexual intercourse scenes are realistically performed according to lyrics. In doing so, a male dancer will lie down on the back of a female dancer, female dancer lays left hand beside body, while right hand is in front of body in a stretched position. Male dancer lays left hand beside body in a stretched position, while right hand is placed firmly on thigh of female dancer. The song used in this scene is *Pleng Na Patt "Tranon"* (sleeping). Typically, when dancers perform flirting gestures and lie down, sexual intercourse is about to begin. However, recent performances use stage lighting design in this scene by dimming lights or closing curtains. The audiences are thus aware that a sexual activity is performed and that the next scene is coming.

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