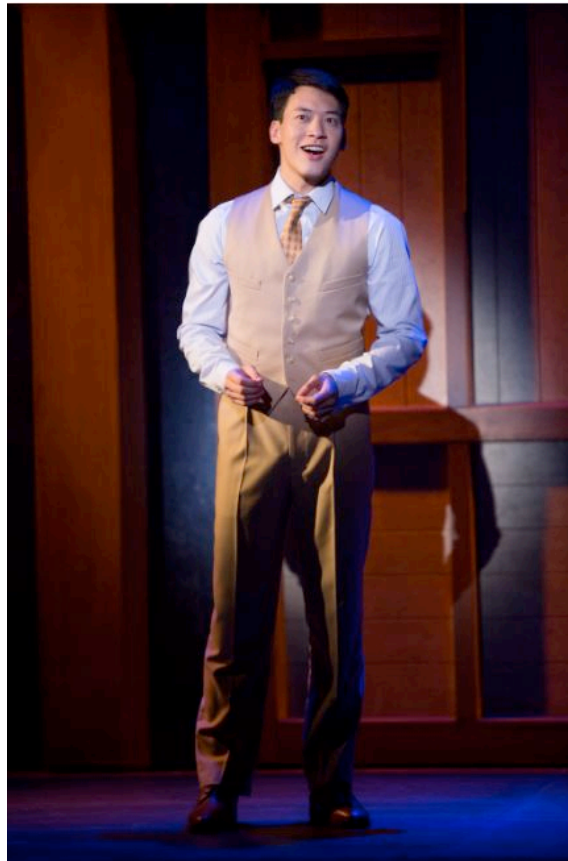


Behind the Musical: Thai Tale Inspiration for ‘Waterfall’

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Bie Sukrit makes his U.S. debut in *Waterfall*. • Photo by Jim Cox

Waterfall is a story of forbidden love, a story that will be familiar to Western audiences who have grown up with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and other love-centered classics.

5th Avenue Theatre’s new musical by *Waterfall* is based on an original Thai story, *Behind the Painting*, which focuses on the character of Noppon, who seeks his true yet forbidden love. “Noppon is one of the great characters from Thai literature, and the production in Thailand was the first time the story of *Behind the Painting* would be performed on stage,” said leading Thai actor Bie Sukrit. “It was an honor to play Noppon in *Behind the Painting* in 2008 in Thailand.”

But *Waterfall* also builds on *Behind the Painting* to combine both Thai and American elements. This is what interested director Tak Viravan in creating both

musicals. “*Behind the Painting* is considered one of the most precious love stories in Thailand. It is about the emotions, and the inability to express those emotions,” Viravan said. “As *Waterfall*, it becomes another kind of love story.”

The theme of forbidden love is still prominent in *Waterfall*, but its cultural reach has become more expansive. “Our leading lady is now changed into an American,” director Viravan said. “*Waterfall* is about the differences of cultures in the world. It becomes about opening up to one another, as we learn about each other’s differences, as the world gets smaller.”

Actor Sukrit, who continues to play Noppon in this new version of the story, has found that his own experience as a performer is mirroring these intercultural encounters in *Waterfall*. “I was presented with this incredible opportunity to be a part of the American adaptation, *Waterfall*, and to do this project with Maltby & Shire,” he said. “And this is my first experience doing a musical in America.”

Sukrit reports that his learning curve has been steep. “I have had to learn so many new things including American acting, theater singing, theater dance, not to mention the English language,” he said. “That’s challenged me so much.”

Viravan agrees that it’s been a great challenge for the entire creative team. “The pacing is usually faster for American audiences, and we don’t waste a word or a sentence,” he said. “For the Thai audiences, it was more easy-going. However, as the show has grown, it becomes about how to balance our differences, which is what the show is all about.”

Sukrit says he continues to work on finding that balance in Noppon’s character. “In Thailand, I know Thai audiences. I know how to make them laugh, how to make them happy, or how to make them cry,” he said. “But I don’t have that sense yet for American audiences.”

As an actor, Sukrit has expressed appreciation for the support he has received from the American performers in the ensemble. “They are all so nice and everyone helps me so much with my English, as well as helping me to learn everything I want to know about America,” he said.

Director Viravan said that the entire team has been generous with their feedback. “The Asian cultures and American cultures are so different, so it is about how to communicate to the American audiences, while still being true and sincere to our culture,” he said. “We have to listen very carefully to everyone in the team, and honor every note and comment.”

Seattle audiences should also expect some surprises in this latest version of *Waterfall*. “There is a scene in which we have to communicate to the audience that a Thai man and a Thai woman are lovers, and they are in a public place,” Viravan said. “Naturally, for an American audience, the characters would kiss.”

But this typical American gesture would not ring true in Thailand. “Some Thai women in the audience in Pasadena knew that kiss was wrong, and were quite offended,” Viravan said. “I knew that that was wrong, too.”

Yet, as the director, Viravan had to find a balance between cultural authenticity in Thailand and cultural recognition in America. “We let it be that way in Pasadena [with the kiss], because it was the best way to communicate to the American audience,” he said. “But with this new version, we know we have to find another way to communicate, since we want it to be true as well.”

Both Viravan and Sukrit have found the parallels of promoting intercultural understanding within *Waterfall*'s story and in their own creative experience to be illuminating, and Viravan summed it up by echoing what many artists have found over the centuries: “Art imitates life, and so life imitates art.”

Waterfall runs from October 1 to 25, at the 5th Avenue Theatre, 1308 Fifth Avenue, Seattle. For more information, visit www.5thavenue.org/show/waterfall.