

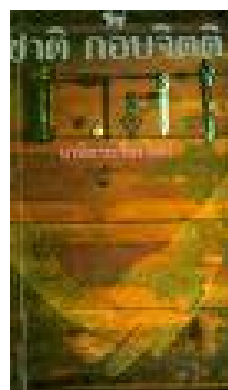
Thai Fiction

time

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TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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To my and everybody else's grandparents

The curtain rises in the dark.

The darkness is total. Nothing to be seen. No movement to be heard.

After a while, a narrow, plunging shaft of light catches an old-fashioned clock hung on the pillar in the middle of the room. The clock thus stands out of the surrounding darkness. Its ticktack grows louder. The clock does not merely look old: its wood is worn-out and you can see the chips and cracks of its enamel, frittered away by time. The accumulated grime and dust also testify that no one takes care of it. But its pendulum still moves from side to side, as it must, unconcerned by the marks of deterioration on the body of the clock.

The time now is 4:45am.

The pencil of light from above does not light up the clock only. It projects itself weakly on the floor as well, faintly revealing the woodwork and an aisle which runs deep into the dark and is flanked on both sides by the dim shapes of mosquito nets over long rows of beds.

The eerie dark forms in them are stretched-out sleeping people.

'There's nothing! There's absolutely nothing!' a parched voice shouts out in the silence.

Some of the bodies on the beds toss and turn, as if the shout had reached into their sleep, but this only lasts for a brief moment, then everything is still and quiet as before.

Ticktack-ticktack

Ticktack-ticktack.

Time passes as time must. The pendulum keeps moving from side to side.

Time goes by. Goes by without anything happening on stage.

Five minutes pass by.

Pass by ever so slowly.

I'm beginning to feel uneasy. Uneasy sitting here watching a clock ticking. Uneasy at the lack of action.

After a while, my nose picks up mustiness combined with a faint offensive smell of urine floating lightly in the air. I'm not at all sure whether the director of the play intends to release such a smell or whether the smell comes from the toilet in the theatre, but I'm pretty sure it must come from the stage, because before the play began there was no such smell.

At this point I sympathize with myself for having to sit caught up in the spectacle of a clock, breathing an unwelcome smell. But then, I'm not the only one in this condition. There are many other spectators sharing the same fate.

But I can't stop thinking that the director of the play must have meant it that way, that the smell

must be necessary to his play. I don't think he let it out only to annoy his audience.

Then, which part of the stage should the smell come from? I ask myself.

With my eyesight now adjusted to the darkness, the outline of the stage becomes clearer.

This dormitory has two aisles. The main one is in the centre of the stage, with beds on both sides, five on the left row, six on the right. The smaller aisle runs between the heads of the beds of the right row and a small cubicle set against the wall on the right side of the stage.

This small cubicle looks very much like a prison cell. The cemented base of its front wall is chest-high and topped with steel bars reaching through to the ceiling. I'm not sure if the cubicle is further partitioned, because the greater darkness on the sides of the stage does not allow me to see anything much.

I understand there must be someone in that iron-barred cubicle, otherwise they wouldn't have partitioned the room, but I don't understand why they must have some old people sleeping in there.

'There's nothing! There's absolutely nothing!' The shout on the stage resounds again.

I'm certain it's the same voice as I heard the first time, and this time I'm able to work out its direction: it comes from somewhere inside the cubicle.

Far left on stage is a long, deep shower room jutting out onto the stage. There is no partition wall, just a doorframe to show the way in and out. A

waist-high, rectangular water basin runs the length of the shower room, which also has a toilet. I'm not sure whether the smell of urine floating by comes from the toilet or not.

Ticktack-ticktack

Ticktack-ticktack.

Time ticks by. Ticks by indefatigably.

The person next to me sighs.

If those who produced the play were sitting watching it also, the sighing and fidgeting of the audience would probably answer their question as to whether they have achieved what they wanted to achieve.

I don't know what it is they want to achieve. Do they want the spectators to feel uneasy, or do they want them to be bored with what they are seeing?

But speaking for myself, I don't want the people who watch my movies to be bored with what they see.

True, uneasiness at times makes for boredom, but surely boredom is entirely different from uneasiness.

As my record shows, I always try to stuff as much uneasiness into my movies as I feel is necessary.

And this is another reason why I wanted to come and see this play, because a newspaper review summed it up neatly as 'the most boring play of the year.'

At first, when the company announced they'd perform this play, I didn't pay much attention, because I was busy shooting my latest movie, but I felt mildly tickled by the fact that they are all only in their early twenties. In fact, according to their biographies, some of them are still university students.

But there they were, foolishly announcing they'd perform a play about the inner feelings of the elderly.

That was what caught my attention.

What would these youngsters know about the inner feelings of old people? Why would young guys and girls like them perform a play about the elderly? Though there are lots of interesting plays for people of their age to perform, they decided to tackle a subject they did not know and had no way of knowing.

The funny thing is, I'll be sixty-three this year and I've never even thought of doing a movie on old people. In my latest production, I've gone back instead to doing a movie about youth. I think it's a lot more entertaining.

That's what caught my attention. Just that.

From then on I didn't follow the news about the company again, because I was fully taken up with my work. When it was announced the play was to be premiered and the proceeds of the performance would go to an old people's home, I read the reports and critical reviews attentively and decided that when I was free from work I'd try to see it. But it didn't reach the stage where I decided I had to see it no matter what.

It's a good thing I stopped shooting my film on schedule and went through the work prints yesterday. The rushes were satisfactory. There was no need for remakes. So today I'm not worrying about work. I left it to the editor to cut the takes that can be used and splice them in sequence on a reel. At least I can

relax for a few days, before going back to the lab to supervise the cutting of the master print.

The performance at which I sit smelling urine is the seven o'clock performance. The audience is sparse. I don't know if it's because the show has run its course or because the play is really boring, as the critics say.

'There's nothing! There's absolutely nothing!' The same shout rings out again.

'Yeah man, we already know there's nothing,' my young neighbour mumbles to his friend.

I dare not turn to look at him. I'm afraid I'll make him even more annoyed. Actually, there's plenty to be annoyed about, given that ten minutes have gone by already and nothing is happening on stage at all, except for the raucous shout being repeated time and time again.

'There's nothing! There's absolutely nothing!'

If this play was showing something interesting, I'm sure nobody would mind the ten minutes gone by, or if some did, it'd be to regret that time had gone by so fast. But not here, not now, with everybody having to sit looking at the clock ticking away, having to sit looking at a lack of action. Even though it'd be the same ten minutes in both cases.

Same for me, actually. I can't take any more of this clock watching, even though I've been forewarned by the reviews that the clock will run until five in the morning before things begin to move on stage. But even so, I just can't control myself. I feel uneasy beyond words.

I'm beginning to see a way not to let myself be manipulated like this any longer, to think of a way not to be bored for the five minutes that remain.

If it were a picture of mine, how would I manage it? I ask myself.

[Start the sequence with—]

Close-up Of the clock needles. Brief shot. /*Cut*

Close-up Of the pendulum, going from side to side. /*Cut*

Close-up Of the whole clock, showing the time as 4:55. The picture recedes slowly to encompass the light in the middle of the room. /*Fade out*

Medium-range (High-angle shot.) *Fade in*/ Of the clock hung on the central pillar of the room. Behind it, the mosquito nets of patients' beds are lined up on either side of the aisle running into darkness. /*Cut*

Medium-range (dolly) (At eye level.) Of the aisle between the beds. Slow traveling to one bed, stopping at the nightstand at the head of the bed. /*Fade out*

Close-up *Fade in*/Of the things on the nightstand. Use ambient light,

just strong enough to see a messy array of sundry items—cheap articles and useful items such as water container, drug phials, spittoon, plate or spoon. After a while, the picture slowly shifts to the body lying on the bed, gets closer and closer. */Fade out*

Close-up

(Through the mosquito net.) Of the face of the person lying on the bed: sunken features, sparse white hair, deep orbits, eyes staring hard (to show the person is not asleep). Slowly dissolving into the picture of the clock. */Fade out*

Close-up

Fade-in/Of the clock dial. Now the time is exactly 5:00.

If this sequence was in my film, it wouldn't take more than one minute for the time shown on the clock to reach five o'clock as desired. But this is the time on a theatre stage. So I have to sit and wait—
The clock strikes five times.

The sliding door at the back of the dormitory (at the very end of the central aisle) opens. Ubon (the nurse) pushes the door wide open. She presses the light switch by the doorframe. The whole hospital ward is suffused in bright light. All of the beds are

seen clearly. The patients under the mosquito nets begin to move. (*NB*: Only the people in six beds do so. The patients in the remaining five beds cannot get up. These are the first and second beds of the left row and the third, fourth and fifth beds of the right row, counting from the door.)

Ubon walks up the central aisle. She is wearing a dark-blue uniform, with a skirt reaching below the knee. She walks by the various beds on her way to the shower room to one side of the stage, switches its light on, turns on the faucets, making sure everything works.

Now all those who can move are putting away their bedding, taking out mosquito nets, folding blankets, etc. Each of them looks weary out of illness and old age.

Ubon walks out of the shower room, takes down the mosquito nets of those patients that cannot move, until she comes to the last of the five beds, Old Yoo's bed (third bed, right row). The body on it cannot stir. Only the eyes are wide open, but stare out expressionless. (*NB*: In this play, conversations will only be heard when the dialogue is specified; as for those not involved in the dialogue, they are to talk as usual but without a sound. This technique is to be used throughout the play.)

Ubon 'Oh, so, granny, you're awake?'

Old Yoo 'Uh-huh.' Indistinct eructation, as if the tongue fills the mouth and has no strength to flex.

Ubon 'Did you sleep well during the night?'
Old Yoo (Shakes her head for an answer.) 'B-ba-bad.'
Ubon (Voice raising.) 'Come again?'
Old Yoo 'B-b-baaad.'
Ubon (Nods in understanding.) 'Just as well. You haven't had a bath in days.'

She walks away from Old Yoo's bed to the shower room, to bring a wheelchair back to the bed. Meanwhile, all patients are going about their routines, such as getting a towel and bowl to go and have a wash. Some already carry their own spittoons in their hands. Others step into the toilet to answer nature's call. All are moving very slowly, with hunched backs.