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# **A Thai Tale**

By

NIKKI HARMON

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(A THAI TALE)

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*A Thai Tale* premiered at the Highlander Theatre at the University of Central Missouri on Sept. 22, 2013, where it won the university's National Theatre for Young Audiences Playwriting Competition.

Cast:

Chatchom ..... Nathaniel Weber  
Songsuda ..... Kacy Ann Barta  
Lek ..... Lauren Gardner  
Sumalee ..... Arista Fleming  
Pichai ..... Christopher Hendrix  
Chorus of Birds ... Samantha Ives, Paris Scott & Caitlin Daily

Production Staff:

Director ..... Dr. Julie Rae Mollenkamp  
Assistant Director ..... Katherine Turnbow  
Assistant Director ..... Bryson Kenworthy  
Stage Manager ..... Taylor Jennings  
Assistant Stage Manager ..... Kevin Williams  
Technical Director ..... Jonathan Orłowski  
Assistant Technical Director ..... Amanda Trout  
Scenic Co-Designers ..... Kalyssa Bates & Mark Jacobsen  
Prop Designer ..... Connor Bush  
Assistant Prop Designer ..... Amber Nieznajko  
Technical Mentor ..... Michael Benson  
Lighting/Animation Designer ..... June Copperfield  
Assistant Lighting Designer ..... Sydney Crank  
Sound Designer ..... Olivia Bradshaw  
Assistant Sound Designer ..... Nathan May  
Faculty Lighting/Animation/Sound Mentor ..... Jeff Peltz  
Costume Designer ..... Audra Viele  
Assistant Costume Designer ..... Courtney Robinson  
Makeup/Hair Designer ..... Rosie Swanson

Assistant Makeup/Hair Designer .....Kaelyn Whitt  
Faculty Costume/Makeup/Hair Mentor .. Stephanie Jorandby  
Master Electrician ..... James Laning  
Thailand Consultant ..... Mia Phutrakul  
Wardrobe Crew ..... Marissa Cooper  
Drapers ..... Courtney Robinson and Branéy Dickerson  
First Hands ..... Branéy Dickerson and Brandi Campbell  
Stitchers..... Stephanie Laaker, Bethanie Million,  
Dashawn Young, Summer Livingston,  
Lauren Smith, David LeVota,  
Kaelyn Whitt, Katherine Pollock

# A Thai Tale

## CHARACTERS

SONGSUDA (w, pronounced song-su-da, translation: beautiful girl): A pin-tailed parrotfinch. She's been in the banyan tree for a very long time.

CHATCHOM (m, pronounced cha-chom, translation: praiseworthy): A wanderer of the world, a singer of song, a peruser of life, an adventurer, a conjurer of mystery, an illusionist with the ability to shape shift.

LĚK HĀ̀ÈNG HĀ̀NỤ̀NG (w, pronounced lay-hang-noon, translation: the small one): The first bird-in-waiting to the queen of Thailand.

SUMALEE (w, pronounced soo-mah-lee, translation: beautiful flower): The third bird-in-waiting to the queen of Thailand.

PICHAİ (m, pronounced "i" as in "bit" and "chai" as in the tea, translation: older brother): A seller of birds. A man of no scruples.

THREE MYTH BIRDS (any gender): Mythological creatures from Thai folklore, they mime the action in the monologues.

## SETTING

The Banyan Tree of Sai Ngam, in northeast Thailand—A 350-year-old single tree covering 35,000 square feet.

## NOTES

If possible, the birds should wear elegant feathered hats. Sumalee and Lěk h̄àng h̄nùng's hats have the traditional Thai peak, while Songsuda's hat is not as regal.

The birds' makeup should be fashioned after the traditional Thai dancers' makeup.

The myth birds should move with the traditional Thai dancers' movements. When they are not "storytelling," they remain onstage and perform as a Noh chorus, listening on their perches, sometimes surrounding the main characters, reacting to the action, providing props and helping with Chatchom's costume changes.

A glossary of Thai terminology has been provided at the back of the playbook.

## PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

The dialogue is written in the cadence of the Nakhon Ratchasima Province of northeast Thailand. It's common for "yes yes" to be spoken very quickly, almost as if it's one word.



## THAI GLOSSARY

Baht: Thai currency, 100 Baht is roughly equivalent to \$3 in 2017.

Karma: The law of moral causation.

Kluay kaek: Fried banana desert made with coconut milk and sugar.

Khun: A polite term that precedes a person's name.

Mai pen rai (pronounced "my pin rye"): "No worries" or "Don't worry about it." A way to keep your head when things are going badly.

Making merit: Doing something to add to your karma status.

Mu ping: Grilled barbecued pork on a stick, usually served with rice.

Nung, soong, saam: One, two, three.

Phraratchathan: A traditional man's shirt, on the order of a Nehru jacket.

Sàwat-dii-kà: Hello (if said by a woman).

Sàwat-dii-khràp: Hello (if said by a man).

Sueng: A string instrument from northern Thailand.

Tuk-tuk: A sort of motorized rickshaw, named because of the sound of their engine.

Wai: Traditional greeting, as a sign of respect by raising both hands, palms together, fingers pointing upwards, then bowing the head until it touches the thumbs. When a person offers the wai, it is respectful to return it. The higher the wai, the lower the head is in relation to the hands. The lower the head, the more respect is being given and the higher the status is of the person receiving the wai.

## A Thai Tale

*(Inside the banyan tree. Sections of the tree are around the stage [stump-like], representing the bottoms of the branches that are growing down from the main tree, which can be climbed upon and sat on. Small swinging perches hang down for the birds to rest on. These perches are where the MYTH BIRDS stay when they're not enacting a story.*

*Multicolored tiny lights hang down around the stage on wires, with the outline of birds serving as a cage for the lights, representing the hundreds of birds that are trapped in the tree.*

*A suggestion of the canopy is visible. It's morning and the sun has just risen. Gobos, cut to represent the leaves and the branches, show how dense the tree is.*

*SONGSUDA is sitting, leaning against a trunk of the banyan tree. It's peaceful and quiet and she's basking in the morning sun, as are the MYTH BIRDS.*

*CHATCHOM enters, strumming a sueng and playing a song. He's dressed simply, wearing a hat, and his long hair falls down to his shoulders. He carries a large shoulder bag.*

*SONGSUDA sees him and gives him a wai.)*

SONGSUDA. *Sàwat-dii-kà, kuhm human player of beautiful song.*

CHATCHOM *(returning the wai).* *Sàwat-dii-khràp, khum bird of many colors, but of what kind, I do not know.*

SONGSUDA. I am a pin-tailed parrotfinch.

CHATCHOM. It is a good name.

SONGSUDA. It is a description.

CHATCHOM. And that is good, too.

SONGSUDA. And you may call me Songsuda.

CHATCHOM. *Kuhm* Songsuda, it is then. And I am called Chatchom. A wanderer of the world. (*With great flourish of hands and speech.*) A singer of song. A peruser of life. An adventurer. A conjurer ...

*(He pulls a coin from under SONGSUDA's wing. The MYTH BIRDS come near CHATCHOM to see the trick better.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). Of mystery ... An illusionist. A prestidigitator of immense prominence ...

*(He takes a silk scarf from his pocket and makes it disappear into his hand.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). And wonder ...

*(He makes it reappear; much to SONGSUDA's and the MYTH BIRDS' amazement, and presents it to SONGSUDA as a gift.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). Throughout lands as far as the earth is wide. As wide as the sun is high. As high as the moon is in the sky!

*(He bows with flourish.*

*No response. After a beat, he lifts his head slightly and peeks up from his bow.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). You may have heard of me?

*(SONGSUDA and the MYTH BIRDS shake their heads no.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd, rising from his bow*). Ahhhh, well, that is understandable. You probably have heard of me, but not by this name. You see, I change my name with every step I take, and alter my shape with every twist in the road. Today a man. Tomorrow, perhaps an elephant. The day after ... well, that is yet to be determined.

SONGSUDA. Then how do you know when someone is speaking to you if you are one thing today and something totally different the next? It must be very confusing to everyone, and to yourself.

CHATCHOM. Not in the least, *kuhm* Songsuda. You see, when I see myself in the reflection of the speaker's eyes, I see who they see, and I answer as such. Unless, of course, I chose to become something else, and then I shift in the blink of an eye and with the speed of a four-winged flying fish, become that which I wish to be seen as, and then answer as such.

*(SONGSUDA is completely and utterly confused.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). I see in your eyes that you are somewhat confused and perhaps a slight bit muddled.

*(SONGSUDA and the MYTH BIRDS nod their heads.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). Of course you are. You see, I am not only a conjurer, an illusionist and a prestidigitator; I also have the extraordinary ability to shapeshift into anything, or anyone, I wish, at any time I decide to, or need to, as the case may be. As in the time I changed into a tiger when a man was chasing me for the insignificant act of taking an absolutely delicious dish of *kluay kaek* off the man's porch.

*(The MYTH BIRDS act out the story as CHATCHOM relates it.)*

CHATCHOM (*cont'd, breathing in deeply the scent of memory*). I can still smell the strong scent of the sweet hot banana cooking in the pan. Swimming in the fragrant coconut milk. And when they put that irresistible delicacy within such a short distance of my grasp, it was simply too much to resist. And I reached up and snatched it, but not before the man grabbed my hand. So, you can certainly understand why I had no choice but to change myself into a tiger. A hungry one at that, as if there is any other kind. The man jumped back at the sight of the beast, and I ran off, but not before emptying the dish of the sweet treat ... Mmmm. I can still taste it. (*Nonchalantly looking around.*) This place here is called ... ?

(*LĚK HĀNG HŪNG enters running, bouncing and twisting across the stage, having just been tossed out of a birdcage. The MYTH BIRDS jump back to make way for her.*)

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). What ... .?!

(*LĚK exits, and we hear a loud thump.*)

CHATCHOM (*cont'd*). Was that?!

SONGSUDA (*with a sigh*). Just another unfortunate resident of the banyan tree, thrust in here by a seeker of good karma ... So, as you were saying. You changed into a tiger over a plate of fried bananas?

(*CHATCHOM's still transfixed on the sudden entrance and exit of LĚK.*)

CHATCHOM. Do birds come and go here like that, often?

SONGSUDA. Oh, yes. I expect she'll be back in ... (*Counting on her feathers.*) Nung ... Soong ... Saam ... and ...

*(LĚK enters, a little wobbly and a little worse for the wear.)*

SONGSUDA *(cont'd)*. Here she is.

LĚK *(dusting off her feathers)*. This is all very confusing and unnerving for someone of my status.

*(CHATCHOM looks at LĚK with amazement.)*

LĚK *(cont'd, to CHATCHOM)*. Why are you looking at me like that? And why have you not greeted me with a *wai*?

*(CHATCHOM gives LĚK a wai, with his head higher than his hands.)*

LĚK *(cont'd)*. Your head!!

CHATCHOM *(looking up slightly from his wai)*. What?

LĚK. Your head! Your head! It is not low enough. Lower it immediately!

*(CHATCHOM looks to SONGSUDA. She motions him to go lower, which he does, raising his hands, lowering his head to his thumbs and still looking at SONGSUDA, who nods. CHATCHOM looks back at LĚK questioningly.)*

LĚK *(cont'd)*. Better. *(Brushing off her feathers.)* One wonders how some humans were raised. Not giving proper respect to one of my class ... inexcusable. *(Shrugging.)* But, humans are humans after all ... Do you have a name, human?

CHATCHOM. Chatchom—A wanderer of the world. *(With flourish.)* A singer of song. A peruser of life. An adventurer ... A ...

LĚK *(dismissively)*. Yes yes. Interesting title. You may raise your head now.

CHATCHOM. Thank you ... I think?

LĚK. I ... (*With greater flourish.*) am LĚk h̄àng h̄nùng! First-bird-in-waiting to her majesty, the queen of Thailand. But for those, like myself, who have the honor of knowing her personally, we are allowed to call her simply, your majesty. You would not be granted that right.

CHATCHOM. It is an honor to meet you.

LĚK. Of course it is. (*To SONGSUDA.*) This place of trees and roots, does it have a name? This forest in a lake?

SONGSUDA. The banyan tree of Sai Ngam.

LĚK. And what is its purpose? Things should always have purpose. Gardens are for sitting and contemplating. Forests are for living in. Lakes are for swimming and drinking. This place. What is the purpose of this place?

SONGSUDA. It is where humans buy you and take you inside and release you to make merit and improve their karma.

LĚK. Nonsense. Good karma comes from good deeds. Everyone knows that. Throwing a bird into a forest ...

SONGSUDA. And eels and turtles and fish. Oh, soooo many fish.

LĚK. And into water, gives you nothing. Nothing for nothing. That is the way of things.

SONGSUDA. But, yet every night the vendors will try and catch you, and put you back into a cage, or a bowl of water, and sell you again the next day. And again. And yet again. Over and over. (*With a sigh.*) There is no end to it.

CHATCHOM. No end at all?

SONGSUDA. None that I can see. But, *mai pen rai*.

LĚK. No no. No *mai pen rai*. Not for me. I must be returned to the Bhubing Palace post haste. To her majesty's garden. This is an absolute fact.

CHATCHOM. The palace is a long distance from here.

SONGSUDA. Did you go for a stroll and take a wrong turn?

LĚK. Of course not. I am first-bird-in-waiting. I do not “stroll.” No no. I was kidnapped.

*(The MYTH BIRDS are deeply interested.)*

CHATCHOM. Kidnapped?!

LĚK. Stuffed into a bag like a stray cat of insufficient worth, then thrown into a moving vehicle that made the most appalling tuk-tuking noise for what seemed like hours. Then handed over to a man who paid ten thousand *baht* for me, only to be stolen the next day by a seller of birds and brought to this place.

CHATCHOM. Ten thousand *baht*! That is a good deal of money.

LĚK *(with a humph)*. For a stray cat of insufficient worth. But not for the first-bird-in-waiting to her majesty, the queen of Thailand! *(With an even larger humph.)* I have never been so insulted. Why the mere ...

CHATCHOM. But ten thousand ...

LĚK. Thought of anyone putting my value at such ...

CHATCHOM. Is still ...

LĚK. A paltry price!

SONGSUDA. And yet, a bird of such importance could be sold for so much more.

LĚK. Exactly my point.

SONGSUDA. Then why did they kidnap you?

LĚK. Oh, yes. The reason. *(With a bored sigh.)* Something about a feud that goes back years and years, between two *mu ping* vendors over something or other. But, that is not what is important. The important part of all this is the value that was put on one such as myself!



SONGSUDA. A feud over food on a stick?

LĚK. Yes yes. Pork, I believe it was.

CHATCHOM. And it went back for years you say?

*(The MYTH BIRDS enact the story in great detail as LĚK tells it.)*

LĚK *(with a big sigh)*. All right, if you both are so interested in that part of the story ... It seems that one man from one family had a food cart on one corner of the street, and his neighbor had a similar cart on an opposite corner. And all was fine until one day the first vendor, as a joke, hid the second vendor's wooden sticks, so he could only sell his grilled pork sitting on the rice. The next day the second man hid the first man's rice, so he had nothing to serve his pork with. Both men thought this was very funny, and laughed about it. But, then the next week the first man took the other man's pork from his cart, so the other man could only sell rice that day. This was not funny, and the second man did not laugh, so he took the first man's coals, so he could not cook his pork at all ... are you sure you want to hear this story? It is not as important as the value they put on me.

CHATCHOM. No, please go on.

LĚK *(resigned)*. All right, then ... one week later, one man stole the other man's customer, so in return, that man stole three eggs from the first man's wife's chicken hutch, which he felt was equal in value to the lost customer, which led to the first one making off with a water buffalo from his neighbor's son's field, which was followed by the second one's son taking two roosters from the first man's son's yard. Which led to the grandsons on both sides taking each other's cows and goats, and plows, until one of them, no one remembers exactly which one it was, took a small

jade Buddha from a house belonging to the great great grandmother of the first man's second cousin, once removed, and blamed the other one for it, which was followed soon after by someone stealing a prized orchard that someone's mother's sister's father-in-law's nephew had planted on the birth of someone's daughter. This is where the story gets a little hazy. So that other one looked for something of equal importance to blame on the last one, and ...

CHATCHOM. He stole you ...

LĚK. Exactly.

SONGSUDA. Because of a piece of barbeque.

LĚK. If you must put it so ... yes. The first-bird-in-waiting was kidnapped over grilled pork on a stick.

*(SONGSUDA giggles, not able to contain herself. The MYTH BIRDS retreat to their perches, giggling to themselves, too.)*

LĚK *(cont'd)*. It is not that humorous.

SONGSUDA *(still giggling)*. I am sorry, your first-in-waiting-ship ...

LĚK. Yes yes. But the most important thing is that I am safe and sound ... *(Motioning around.)* And, am somewhere I should not be. And that I need to be returned, as soon as possible, to the queen's garden!

SONGSUDA *(with slight sarcasm)*. And how do you expect that to happen, your first-in-waiting-ship, if I may be allowed to ask? *(Motioning to the great expanse of the banyan tree.)* Because many of us here would be extremely interested to know the secret of escape. I know I, for one, would be very interested, as I have been in the banyan tree for so many sunsets that I have forgotten my own age.

LĚK. Well, I myself would do nothing. Others would come and rescue me. That is the way of things.

SONGSUDA. Ahhh! The proverbial others. (*Looking around.*) And these others ... are ... where, your first-in-waiting-ship?

LĚK. That is a question that is best left to those to do that sort of thing. Who rescue. They would know of such things. I would have no knowledge of that sort of thing.

SONGSUDA (*condescending*). I see.

LĚK. I detect a slight edge to your chirp.

SONGSUDA. Yes yes. It is called “experience.”

*(SONGSUDA and LĚK start to come at each other, but CHATCHOM steps between them.)*

CHATCHOM. Ladies, may I proffer a thought?

LĚK. If you must, but a small one. Your station in life does not allow for you to use up too much of the time of one of my station.

CHATCHOM. My thought is that I could purchase two of those little bamboo cages from one of those unscrupulous vendors who conduct their business outside the tree, and return to put each one of you inside, and walk out of the tree and into freedom! A simple, but effective plan.

LĚK (*to SONGSUDA*). See. I told you. The question would be answered by one who does that sort of thing. (*To CHATCHOM, with a flick of her wing.*) Hurry up, then. Off you go, and acquire two of those bamboo vessels, and remove us from this place of roots and water quickly.

SONGSUDA. Ahhhh, were it that simple.

CHATCHOM. It’s been tried?

SONGSUDA. And tried, and tried again. The vendors are very possessive of their “stock,” as they call us. Cages with birds are allowed into the tree, but not out. The humans

must return the cages completely empty when they leave. Pockets are checked, bags are looked into. Every human is viewed with a suspicious eye.

*(The MYTH BIRDS enact the story.)*

SONGSUDA *(cont'd, remembering)*. There was a human once, awhile back, who attempted to carry a fish out in his mouth. In that case, the vendor saw a single drop of water fall from his lips, and proceeded to slap the human on his back with a big thump, and the fish came flying out as if he had wings, and plopped right into the waiting water bowl the vendor had at the ready. And then there was the woman who tucked a turtle into her boot, which seemed like an extremely good idea to both the woman and the turtle at the time. But, the turtle panicked when he peeked over the edge of the boot and saw the vendor approaching, and slid inside, causing the woman to hop about from foot to foot in rapid succession, which, of course, alerted the vendor that something was amiss, and the hapless turtle ended up right back in the banyan tree, again. *(Shaking her head.)* No no. They are on to us.

*(The MYTH BIRDS agree, sadly.)*

CHATCHOM. I could always ...

SONGSUDA. No no, they know that plan, too.

CHATCHOM. Well, then there's always ...

SONGSUDA. And that one, also. Vendors are very good at keeping us in here. And that is a known fact ... unfortunately.

CHATCHOM. There must be a way.

SONGSUDA. There is.

CHATCHOM & LĚK. Yes?!