

MINDS AND MISDEMEANORS

Known for using dance to explore the human psyche, DUJDAO VADHANAPAKORN is now trying to disarm it, writes MAX CROSBIE-JONES

Who are you? What do you feel when you lie? What kind of family did you grow up with? The questions in Dujdao Vadhanapakorn's *Humanimal* come thick and fast. You watch her latest performance piece in a state of tense anticipation: what is she going to ask next and how is her subject, shut away, zoo animal-like, in a clinical white interrogation room, going to react? Throughout it, she sits at one end of the room with a clipboard in one hand and the other steadying a video camera trained on her subject: a different guest artist each night. Ambient lighting and creeping white noise add to the dystopian mind game vibes.

Playing at Bangkok's 100 Tonson Gallery this month, *Humanimal*'s simple yet unnerving lab format draws inspiration from two unlikely sources: Prateep Suthathongthai's *A Little Rich Country*, a contemporary art exhibition on show there for the past few months, and *Sudmanud*, a novel penned by Dujdao's late grandfather, Likit Vadhanapakorn, in the 1970s.

The former consists of painted recreations of the tattered covers of Thai textbooks that helped assimilate and indoctrinate the Isaan region in the 20th century; the latter is a tale of small-town family politics set in Chachoengsao province. "It's about a family of farmers who have been taken advantage of by a Chinese businessman who tries to bribe the local officers," she says excitedly, a few days into the show's run. "Alongside that are many fun plot threads, including a love story and a thief, but the concept is to show how awful and ugly humans can be."

For almost 17 years, Dujdao has been interrogating ideas through dance, usually within the framework of Bangkok's acclaimed B-Floor theatre company, sometimes outside out of it. During that time, she has emerged, alongside other key members Teerawat Kage Mulvilai, Jarunun Phantachat and Ornanong Thaisriwong, as one of the country's most promising – and unpredictable – theatre



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artists. Her director credits include *Secret Keeper*, for which performers standing in a shallow pool of water turned the audience's secrets into dance as melting ice dripped around them.

Another Dujdao piece, *Blissfully Blind*, was a thinly-disguised commentary on human conflict and intransigence that offered different viewpoints from which to see the action. And more recently, *Afterlight*, her ethereal video and performance piece for the Bangkok Art Biennale, broached body politics and post-colonialism by channeling the complicated history of the city's East Asiatic building. It was arguably her most arresting offering to date. "Why do you walk the way you walk?" she whispers in the video voiceover as she creeps through this peeling, Venetian-style building, her arms and torso slowly contorting, seemingly against her will, as she does so. "How much do we own our own lives?"

Challenging audiences with experimental movement, bold visuals and subtle sociopolitical allegory has been B-Floor's *raison d'être* for years. Yet the versatility of its members – the way they flit between roles – has also been key to its success. For the company's 20th anniversary celebration, a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, Dujdao is listed not as a performer, producer or director, but as set designer. "The content we're interested in is quite different," she says of her fellow B-Floor directors and how they support and complement each



other. In her eyes, Kage "approaches political issues in terms of social structures and uses a lot of symbolism", Jarunun's work is "quite conceptual but also very fantasy", and Ornanong is a dance soloist who "loves to satire political situations and humanistic issues in Thailand."

And how does she see herself? "My background is psychology, so I tend to look at and through the person longer. I'm not very good at seeing social structures clearly, but I love to observe how human psychology impacts our situation."

Humanimal is possibly her bravest exploration of the human psyche – the machinations of identity, ego and superego – so far, not least because it involves no dancing whatsoever. "I used to call my works experiential performance, but in this one the audience experience is in a very subtle way," she explains. "There is not as much activity as in my previous work." As most of her guest artists are creatives in other fields, not seasoned performers, nerves are running high. "All the artists in my show are super anxious," she admits. "But I've told them: 'Your anxiety is



Secret Keeper



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welcome... bring it on!" She hopes to get under their skin, to disarm them, and for improvisation to play a leading role. "Often when a performer or anyone goes on stage, they try to arm themselves, but I love human reactions and seeing the vulnerability of the person, so I've asked them not to try to cover things up and to allow us to see their anxiety and fear."

If Dujdao, who began dancing instinctively at a young age and joined B-Floor during her last year at Thammasat University, is starting to sound akin to a therapist, that's probably because she is one: back in 2009 she studied dance movement psychotherapy at London's Goldsmith University. Unsurprisingly, it had a big impact on her, both personally and professionally. "Before that I was just expressing myself, a performer working only with the body, not someone who questioned or wondered about human nature," she says. "I discovered that you have to have empathy and to be empathetic to everybody, to allow people to have their own stories and respect, and that changed me. Not just my work changed – my personality changed, too."

As well as informing Dujdao's approach to theatre, psychotherapy has taken her career in some unusual directions. She is currently the co-host of *R U OK*, a podcast for online news and lifestyle platform *The Standard*, tackling mental health in a loose, conversational manner. She also has a full-time job at one of Thailand's leading private healthcare groups. Her role there is a novel one. "I teach empathetic communications," she says. "I translate all the skills that psychotherapists use and apply them to a healthcare provider: try to get them to communicate better and more than they're used to, and to care more for patient's feelings and ideas."

One of the ways she does this is by retooling theatre exercises for workshops with the group's doctors, nurses, technicians, executives and leaders. "I ask them to think about how to do open-ended questions.

Normally doctors say: 'Do you have a cold?' 'Do you have a sore throat?' They ask closed questions. I get them to think about how feelings and expectations would change if they turned things around and made them open-ended."

None of this sounds all that different to what ensues in *Humanimal*; the show is essentially a series of interrogation exercises made up of open-ended questions. These appear designed to elicit meaningful answers – and strip layers – from the subject. Gradually, as the line of questioning becomes more direct – "Have you ever stolen?", "Have you ever harmed someone?" – their primal thoughts and base impulses are revealed. Or, at least, that's the plan. During the session I saw, that evening's guest, contemporary artist Dusadee Huntrakul, fluctuated between discomfort and bemusement. He anxiously rubbed his feet or cupped his head in his hands one minute; blithely ate the dinner provided. Whether he had been fully disarmed or not is open to debate.

What links her grandfather's old book and the new art exhibition together with this kind of impulsive, risky performance? The answer appears to lie in a cross-pollination of their themes of craven self-interest and social development. In each session, Dujdao attempts to tease out the raw, animal instincts of those who have grown up in a censorious society where people are told what to think and how to behave, and where books, including fictional stories such as *Sud-manud*, often serve moralistic or propaganda purposes. As she succinctly puts it: "My work is about people, or 'humanimals', who live in Thailand... this little, rich country."

Tantalisingly, in a dramatic upending of the show's format, she will switch roles – become one of those people – on two yet-to-be-disclosed dates. "I'm very nervous," she says with a big smile when asked how she feels about the prospect of answering *Humanimal*'s questions instead of asking them. "I know how powerful the process can be." ■

