

# The mystical Erawan shrine fights on

> Dominick A. Merle

There's a tiny shrine in the heart of bustling Bangkok that has no particular historical significance, and yet is powerful enough to bring huge multinational corporations to their knees.



Dancers at the shrine

راقصات المزار

It's called the Erawan Shrine and sits on what might be the priciest piece of property in the Thai capital, at the intersection of Ploenchit and Rajadamri Roads. It is shielded today, almost guarded, by the massive Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel.

Whether the hotel allowed the shrine to stay on its property or the shrine allowed the hotel to build is debatable. What is known is that many international conglomerates have been anxious to buy the property over the years and move the shrine, but had to back off because of huge demonstrations by the faithful believers in the shrine's powers. ▶

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It started out routinely enough in 1953 when work began on the nearby Erawan Hotel. Many Thais believe there is a deity or god in every plot of land, and after any construction a permanent shrine must be erected to appease the deity.

However, when the hotel project was riddled with mishaps from the start, workers got spooked and walked off the job. It stayed unfinished for three years, until it was decided to build the shrine first, and then get on with the construction. Everything proceeded smoothly after that.

The centerpiece of the shrine is the four-headed deity Brahma (Phra Prom) which represents the Hindu god of creation. Almost immediately, the shrine gained a reputation for granting wishes. Thais and foreigners from all parts of the world began arriving with their requests, and musicians and dancers were on hand to perform and pray with them. Donations kept the shrine in existence.

For the next 35 years, the little shrine with the big powers continued on at its private intersection, warding off big corporations that wanted to buy the valuable property and relocate the shrine. Then, in 1991, the Hyatt corporation reached the only logical compromise, building its five-star hotel gingerly around the shrine, almost protecting and sheltering it.

Going one step further, it named the property the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel, since the original Erawan Hotel the shrine was built to protect is no longer there, but perhaps now reincarnated, as some followers believe

However, this happy arrangement was about to take a tragic turn. On the early morning of March 21, 2006, a mentally ill man walked into the shrine with a hammer and smashed the four-headed Brahma to pieces. He was beaten to death on the spot by two bystanders, who were arrested and now are reportedly in prison.

But the shrine continued on while a new statue was being constructed. The battered one was covered with a white cloth, the worshippers increased and

more dancers and musicians performed. On May 21, 2006, the new statue arrived, made of gold, bronze and pieces of the original. It was an elaborate ceremony, attended by followers from all over the world and telecast live throughout Thailand. And so if you visit the shrine today you will see dancers dressed in the same Thai costumes that were worn in 1956, the musicians will be playing the same music and incense will fill the air around the four-headed Brahma.

But there are two distinct changes. The dancers are no longer allowed to perform in the open area around the statue. Because of a city ordinance, they must now dance under a covered alcove.

Donations are also a little more regulated. A man sits at a small table under a sign that reads in Thai and English that for two dancers you pay so much, for four so much more...and so on.

The mystical, magical Erawan Shrine has staked its claim at the very heart and soul of Bangkok. ■



Author's wife Susan Merle at shrine

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