

The Marionettes of Burma

A Threatened Tradition



Michael Meschke, European puppet maestro, travels to Burma in search of marionettes and puppet theatres.

Before embarking on the project to map out and promote the ancient art of Burmese marionettes, I tried to gain a better understanding of Burma, and was aware that assistance and financial aid from the West might be viewed with suspicion by the military government there. I appreciated the risky nature of what I was about to undertake, and realised that my approach would be one which would circumvent contact with the country's authorities, and that I would be working mostly from outside Burma.

Why Burma?

My interest in Burma's relatively forgotten marionettes can be traced back to an early childhood memory which has been a source of inspiration for my own practice of puppetry and profession in theatre. I was five years old when my father showed me an issue of a German magazine called *Atlantis*. In it, I saw the faces of creatures which looked friendlier than any that I had ever seen. I could not forget their tender smiles. I looked around in the real world and wondered where they could be found. Eventually I realised that those were not human beings that I had seen, but marionettes from the distant country of Burma, in Asia. It took several decades before I finally had the opportunity to travel to the country whose marionettes had fascinated me so much.

Characteristics

My relationship with Burma's marionettes was based on their attractive appearance, i.e. their aesthetics, which differs from all other string puppet traditions. I would later learn that they also have specific manufacturing and performance-related technical characteristics.

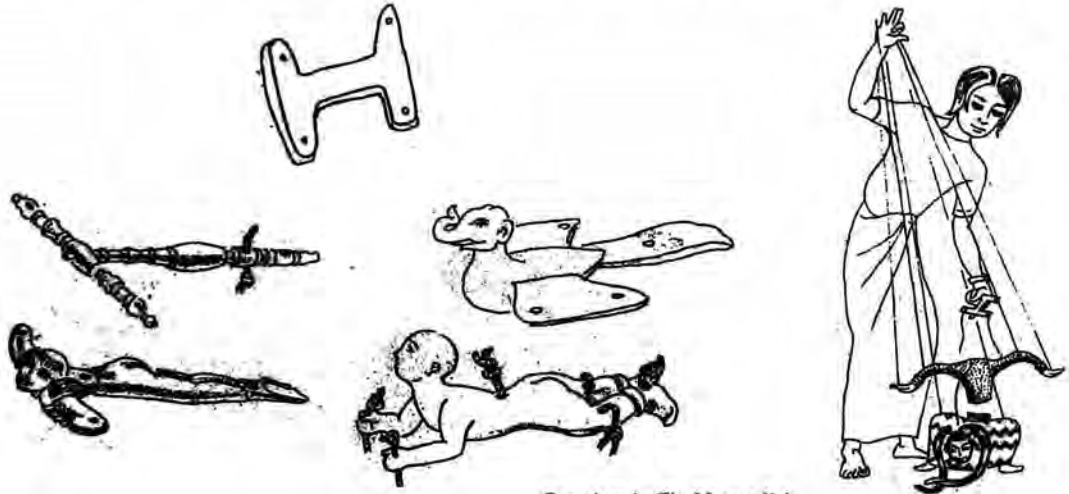
The manufacturing, for example, involves connecting the body parts not just by links but also by ingenious threads and strings.

The puppet usually has an extra joint in the thigh and the arm (see illustration). Furthermore, not all of the strings are attached to the control (for creating movements) which primarily holds strings connected to the marionettes' shoulders – they bear the body weight – and to the head. Strings connected to the legs, lower arms and upper arms – serving three important functions – lie loose on top of the control. They are pulled, one at a time or together, and manipulated in the space above or in front of the control. This requires true virtuosity.



First visit

I recall my first visit to Burma in the 1970s. Halfway on the road from the Rangoon (Yangon) airport to the city, I spotted a gigantic tree in the middle of the street. The crown of the tree was covered with dazzling white flowers. As we came closer, my eyes widened. Those were not



Drawings by Tin Maung Kyi

flowers on the tree; they were horses, marionettes painted white, complete with strings and controls. Someone explained the phenomenon to me: every year in February, the Ne Daw Festival is held, during which the spirits (nats) celebrate the joy of living. I was reminded of the Dionysus feast in Ancient Greece. One of the nats is called Oo Min Yaw, a wild spirit who likes to get drunk and always rides a white horse. The horse is considered a holy creature, and white horse-marionettes are included in the Burmese puppet theatre's permanent gallery of characters. They are hung up in trees only once a year. I happened to arrive just at the right time!

Everywhere I turned in the city of Rangoon, I saw those smiling faces from my childhood, like mirrors of human faces, and of course the source of inspiration for their kindly features was the Burmese people themselves.

A puppeteer, whose name I must withhold, showed me the city's largest pagoda, the Shwedagon. All kinds of knick-knacks and souvenirs, including marionettes, were sold on its steps. While I was examining these, an old woman waved to me. She was standing,

discreetly hidden, behind a golden dome and had observed my interest in marionettes. She wanted to help me buy some really good ones, from her of course! How should one judge their quality? Well, the eyes should be made of glass, not just painted on, because glass reflects light in such a way that their lustre resembles that of the human eye.

I could not help thinking that the ability of the human eye to reflect light does not guarantee that the expression is tender – there are evil eyes too. How could a people with such obviously tender expressions, a people who brought forth an art of puppet faces with great sensitivity, survive under the oppression of a military dictatorship? The old woman then encouraged me to feel the marionette under its costume, between its legs. It had sculptured genitals. I was perplexed. Why bother with work to include such details when the puppets wear thick and magnificent costumes? The old woman explained: “the marionette is created as a representation of a human being. The human being is a representation of the Divinity. The Divinity, by definition, is perfect, and therefore the marionette must be so as well.”

The woman’s expert knowledge convinced me, and I bought a couple of marionettes from her, including a naked, discarded boy-marionette. I was informed later that there was a ban on the export of marionettes. The authorities seemed to consider marionettes a part of the national heritage and, therefore, they should not be taken out of the country. How the little boy ended up at the Marionette Museum in Stockholm need perhaps not be examined too closely.

A few years later, I saw a full theatrical performance in the city of Pegu (now Bago). It was in 1982, when I brought the Stockholm Marionette Theatre company on a study tour through Asia. After a long journey by car through the pitch-black Burmese night, we arrived at a large pagoda outside Pegu. On the slope, one could discern a sea of silent people sitting on the ground. In the distance, light flickered from a small marionette stage. It caught everyone’s attention, unless you were eating or taking a nap on the grass. The graceful marionettes were slowly walking around with dignified steps, their heads tilting and turning elegantly. An exotic orchestra filled the



A puppeteer at the Sein Moo Tar theatre, Mandalay

night with evocative sounds. The story which was narrated, naturally taking place in ancient times, showed the battle against evil forces, monsters and wicked rulers.

After the performance, we were allowed to take a look behind the stage. The interest of these rare foreign visitors seemed to frighten the puppeteers. Any interaction with us could be compromising for them.

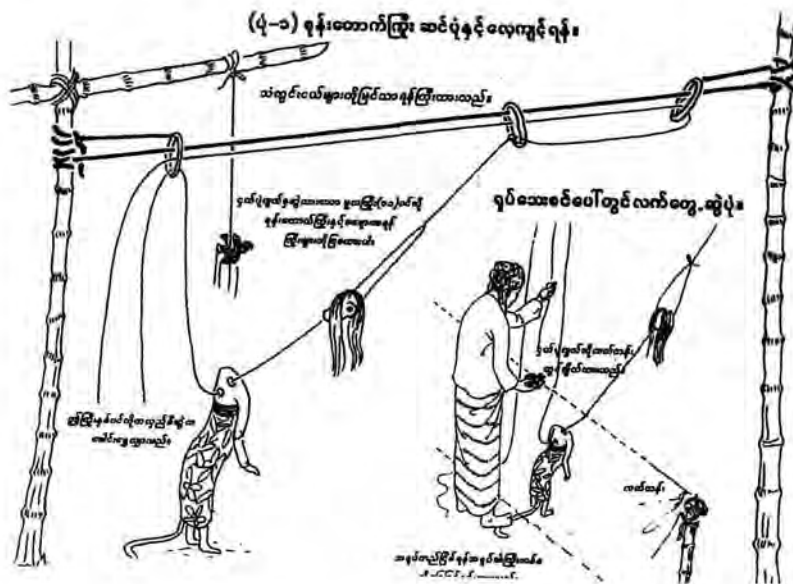
This first experience of a marionette performance reinforced my enchantment with the art form. When I left the country, I thought that a people who are able to keep their genuine traditions alive despite all kinds of distress and oppression will be able to survive any tyranny. I hoped that these little freedom fighters of wood and brocade would live on in the future through new generations of puppeteers.

The current situation (2007)

On the advice of SPAFA's senior guest researcher Dr Tin Maung Kyi, a Burmese doctor and expert in Burmese marionette theatre traditions, I made a brief visit to Mandalay, the home of marionette tradition, and to Yangon in February 2007. I was able to map out most of the still remaining marionette theatres, as seen in the list at the end of this article. The incomplete list is merely an attempt by an outsider to survey the present situation, which may interest Western specialists, especially those who have hopes of fostering and achieving well-developed cultural exchanges.

What is performed?

A performance consists of dialogue, songs, and music. The repertoire of the various groups is fairly similar, simply because the tradition offers a limited choice of topics and a gallery of approximately thirty classic characters, one of which is the horse that was described earlier. The other significant characters are the Hermit, the King of the Heavenly Troops, the Good Heavenly Creature, the Evil Heavenly Creature, the Prime Minister, the Prince, the Princess, the Lady-in-waiting, as well as clowns, demons, wizards, witches, and animals such as the Magic Snake, the Monkey, the Tiger and the Elephant (the animals have the distinction of being reincarnations of the Buddha).



Tin Maung Kyi illustrates the equilibristic execution of a head flying over the audience.

Topics used in performances derive from stories of the Buddha’s life (Jakata tales), and from mythology and Burma’s history. Adaptations of modern drama can also be seen.

The performance of some amazing pieces requires sensitivity to both drama and dance, and entails technical challenges. Here is a description made by Dr Tin of a peculiar event in the classic marionette performance:

‘The witch was believed by the Burmese to be a lady secretly trained in the art of black magic. In puppet plays, she was always displayed as a flying head with long hanging hair. I remember a puppet play during the 1950s, at a place now occupied by a police station in Mandalay, in which the witch’s head was seen flying over the audience in a rapid tempo provided by drum-circle. The head was hung by a rope tied to the top of a bamboo pole about twelve cubits [approximately 18 feet] high. The rope ran from the pole to the stage. While the head was rotating, a firework in her mouth astonished the spectators whose eyes were following the moving head.’

Then and now

The original place for marionette theatre was at the pagodas (Burmese Buddhist temples), which indicates the links – a common phenomenon around the world – between religion and puppet theatre traditions. The puppeteers were paid by the pagoda community, and



Sketch by Tin Maung Kyi



The writer meeting Ma Ma Naing (far right), leader of Mandalay Marionettes Theatre at the 'Htwe Oo Myanmar' traditional puppet show in Yangon



Academy Sein Moo Tar, Mandalay

marionette performances were naturally part of pagoda festivals, which were social meeting points. The performances lasted all night and attendance was free for the audience. In the middle of the 18th century, the country's Minister of Drama established a set of rules and regulations relating to the performances, and marionette theatre was highly regarded by the Royal Court.

A performance, such as the one in Pegu in 1982, was an epic drama which captivated – for hours – the attention of the audience, who was usually focused on how well the puppeteers manipulated their puppets, since the majority were already familiar with the stories and plots.

Marionette theatre is rarely held during pagoda festivals these days, and the number of theatre groups has, naturally, been drastically reduced. Ma Ma Naing, a theatre leader from Mandalay, explained that her theatre is engaged to perform no more than once a year for a pagoda festival. She added that the situation for puppet theatres could only be improved with government help.

While it is difficult for people to earn a living in Burma today, it is even more difficult for them to do so in marionette theatre. It is known that the small number of individuals who persist in such a calling have to hold different jobs to support themselves.

Tourism

There is a view that tourism promotes democratic development and, for obvious reasons, many people have their hopes set on the support of the tourism industry while others are wary of its impact. I cannot help but recall Mikis Theodorakis's message to the world after he was set free from the Greek dictatorship (1967-1974); he said that people should visit the country to bear witness to and expose the dictatorship.

Representatives of marionette theatres in Mandalay insisted that 'as long as there are tourists, the marionette theatre can survive.' This is because only tourists can pay, whereas the few Burmese who watch a performance expect free admission.

Yangon's only marionette theatre is located inconspicuously in an office building in the middle of the city. It opened recently and is beautifully furnished, waiting for tourists to find their way there. Audiences are ferried to the theatre by travel agencies, which organise strictly scheduled programmes for a small number of tourist groups. These tourists seemed lost and did not know what to expect.

Adjusting cultural expression to the terms of the tourist industry is a humiliating way of keeping a great national tradition alive because this often requires artistic compromises. Nevertheless, I have to admit that relying on tourism is probably the only way left to preserve the



Two clowns: one a human actor, the other a marionette

tradition, and maybe even regenerate it. The phenomenon does not only affect Burma, but also all the so-called developing countries. A prerequisite for mitigating the compromises is that the artists do not start playing to the gallery, with crowd-pleasing effects, but manage to maintain the original nobility of the art. After having tactful

conversations with some artists and performers, it became clear to me that there is among them a strong awareness of their predicament.

What are some of the adjustments? They involve not only the shortening of performances, but also the restructuring of contents and forms of expression. All the groups have a mixed programme lasting less than one hour, in which marionette play is combined with performances by live dancers and clowns. The repertoire of dancers and marionettes playfully imitating each other is very popular. In the West, we do mix art forms and have similar blending of disciplines.

Various theatres specialise in certain recurrent pieces, adapted to the skilfulness of the individual puppeteers. The Htwe Oo Myanmar theatre in Yangon showed, for example, two rope-skipping clowns who, at the finale, lifted a large ring into the air and jumped through it. In Mandalay, at the Academy Sein Moo Tar Theatre, a virtuoso artist, fully visible to the audience, manipulated a marionette



*Moustache Brothers,
Mandalay*



*Ohn Maung, leader of Mintha
Theatre*



*Htwe Oo Myanmar, traditional
puppet show, Yangon*

which then manipulated yet another smaller marionette. This classic repertoire is considered to be so difficult that those who master it fight over exclusivity.

In these crossover forms, one can sense a viable regeneration: instead of endless epic stories which are difficult for the passing tourist to understand, the different genres are now combined by means of short episodes, many of them comical pieces, which are visually accessible, impressive, and appealing to locals and foreigners of all ages.

Professional training

In Burma, just like everywhere else, development depends on two things: a tradition to build on and the professional training of new generations.

Burmese traditions are among the world's richest, and they continue to develop, i.e. masters who draw knowledge from the depths of their people's resources continue to practise, and refine their skills. Puppet theatre practitioners from the West have much inspiration to gain here, and much to learn.

With regard to training, the situation is more difficult. In the old days, young people underwent training with a master through practical experience; this method has almost ceased to exist. A few years ago, three masters in Mandalay joined forces to offer free courses, but these were cancelled due to a lack of pupils.

At the Mintha Theatre in Mandalay, I received information which somewhat altered my perception of the regime's educational system. At the University of Culture (a university focused entirely on cultural subjects) which is located far out in the countryside, a female

dancer of the Mintha Theatre, Mya Nanda, taught marionette-handling during the day. Thirty students trained in the techniques of operating marionettes for ninety minutes per day for three years. They also studied dance and music. I travelled there, but was not allowed to enter. Foreign visitors must have a special permit, for which I did not want to apply.

I was told that the Ministry of Culture (Department of Dance and Drama) in Yangon ran a three-year course from which fifteen students, mostly female, graduated every year. It was impossible to verify this information, but it is evident that very few players can find work.

Resistance

For the Burmese marionette theatre art form to develop, it is necessary to meet the threats against its existence. Practitioners try to survive as best they can, skilfully manoeuvring and performing allegorical stories about the struggle between good and evil, or resorting to extremely bold and open satire, like that of the famous Moustache Brothers.

The Moustache Brothers are three artists who, together with their wives, present the cheering audience a combination of shameless monologues, comical clown numbers, dance, and puppet play. Two of the brothers have served long sentences in prison for their outspokenness and for performing for Aung San Suu Kyi, whose portrait hung on the walls of the 20-square-metre theatre venue which only provided a few stools for its audience. At the moment, the interest of foreign spectators and international attention persuade the artists to prevail. The resistance of the Moustache Brothers has become a point of honour, and provides a breathing space in a restrictive environment.

In the long run, there is a possibly greater threat than the



Ms Mya Nanda with the students, Mandalay



Mr U Than Aung (left)



current political issues: the apparently undeniable phenomenon of audiences preferring other entertainment – television, games, films, etc. People just do not want to pay for a marionette show. In the wake of modernisation, real or false, comes the illusion that happiness can be found by imitating Western culture. A very real threat can therefore be found in the form of American subcultures that flood and compete for consumption in a country no matter what type of regime it has.

What can be done from abroad? One recommendation is to work against the isolation of the artists by showing them that the world values their traditions; to give recognition and awards to marionette players; or to make it possible for more ensembles to travel abroad and present their art, without letting this become, or appear to be, a cultural exchange with the military regime. For the artists to obtain passports for travel overseas is not easy, but their success abroad can increase the prestige of their art, and thereby, to some extent, protect them in their own country.

Conclusion

What other possibilities are there for the survival and development of Burmese marionette theatre? And in what way, if any, is it possible for foreign interests to be of assistance in the present situation?

Considering the limitations of my attempt to make a contribution, it would be presumptuous to draw definite conclusions. I have gained fresh information which can now be passed on outside of

Burma. Indirectly and on a long-term basis, this can contribute to the revival of the art within the country.

The truly difficult challenge is to promote work opportunities for forgotten artists on a local level by international cultural exchanges, without co-operating with or promoting the junta government.

The first step is to maintain contact with the individual artists. Another is to inform colleagues and interested parties in the West of the situation of marionette theatre in Burma.



*Two puppeteers, vintage 9031
U Pan Aye, Mandalay
and Michael Meschke, Stockholm*

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- Elisabeth den Otter: *Thabin! Burmese puppetry, music, song and dance*, Amsterdam 2000 – a most informative CD-Rom. Contact: puppetry@euronet.nl

Theatre Company addresses:

- Mandalay Marionettes Co. 66 Street, between 26th & 27th streets, Mandalay
www.mandalaymarionettes.com
- Mintha Theatre, 27 Street, between 65th & 66th streets, Mandalay www.mintha.theatre.com
- Academy Sein Moot Tar, Block 306, 89 Street, between 32rd & 33rd streets, ChanAye Thar Zan Township, Mandalay, www.seinmoottar.com
- Moustache Brothers, 39 Street, between 80th & 81 streets, Mandalay
- Htwe Oo Myanmar, 422/426 Strand Road, Level 11, Commercial Centre, Yangon
www.htweoomyanmar.com

Professor Michael Meschke is an eminent practitioner of puppet theatre, and has devoted a lifetime to the practice and research of puppetry. Based in Sweden (Stockholm), he travels widely outside it, presenting performances and participating in international seminars and workshops. Meschke has published a book, 'In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre', and is also providing assistance in establishing small puppet theatres. He wrote the above article in spring 2007.