



## Festivals: through Jane's Eyes

*Jane Iverson, photographer and writer, has been travelling extensively throughout Southeast Asia, capturing with her camera the spirit of the people, the cultural diversity and the festivals. Paul Margach, on a training assignment for six months with SPAFA Centre, met the photographer, and from the interview presents the following:*

**T**here is a photograph of three young monks sitting under umbrellas. One is gazing skyward, in awe. A second has his head bowed, as though in careful contemplation. And the third is caught, wonderfully, by the camera's lens spouting a mischievous grin.

The picture typifies the style of photojournalist Jane Iverson: capturing a joyous spontaneity but at the same time perplexing the audience somewhat, leaving the questions raised unanswered. Why,



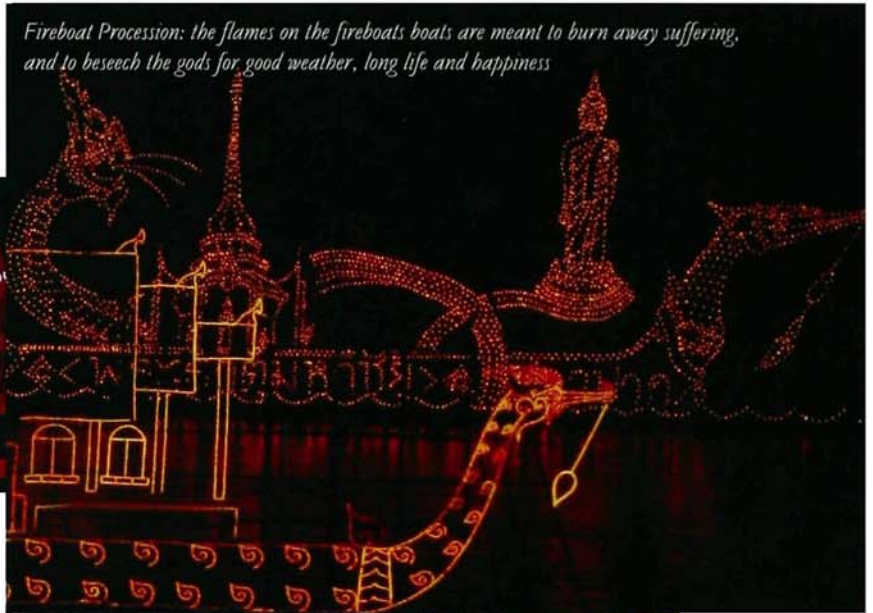
*Three young monks*

*Rocket Festival in Yasothon: local villagers having a wonderful time celebrating the festival while anticipating the following day's launchings*



*Lunar New Year: vendor selling brightly coloured miniature stick dragons*

*Fireboat Procession: the flames on the fireboats boats are meant to burn away suffering, and to beseech the gods for good weather, long life and happiness*



*Fireboat Festival - Nakhon Phanom: merit-making performances at Wat That Phanom; long fingernails used in traditional dances*



*Wax Castle Festival: decorative peacock, made from banana leaves, flowers and peacock feathers*



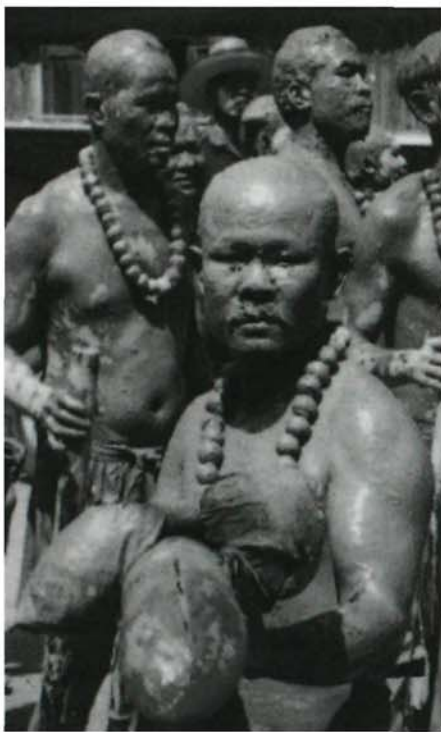
*Surin Elephant Round-up: the parade of baby elephants*



*Surin Elephant Show: elephants demonstrating their strength and dexterity in group balancing acts*



*Fireboat Festival: graceful dancers performing traditional Likay dances at Wat That Phanom*



*Ghost Festival: mud-covered men representing spirits that rise to participate in the festivities*

for example, is one boy smiling so fiendishly while the other two remain stone-faced? What is one looking up at? Why are they sat there in the first place? “It was a really special moment being able to capture that,” Ms. Iverson reveals, acknowledging it to be one of her favourites.

Jane Iverson faces a dilemma on a regular basis: as a photographer, she wishes to share every aspect of her experiences with others but as a self-appointed promoter of Southeast Asian culture, she is keen to encourage viewers to visit smaller, less popular regions more, on their own. How does one go about telling a story? A recent exhibition at Bangkok’s Neilson Hays Library, the Celebration Series, indicates just how challenging she found combining art and promotion.

She confesses to feeling somewhat restricted by what she was able to put on display. The lack of over-all space at the Neilson Hays gallery meant that she had to reduce the number of photographs shown, forcing her to focus on just six Thai festivals. “Being a photojournalist,” she states, “I want to tell a story and the more I have my favourite photographs, I want to include them too.”

At the same time, she recognises the necessity in limiting herself. “I had to remember that my main idea was to tweak [people’s] curiosity and get them out into the areas themselves.”

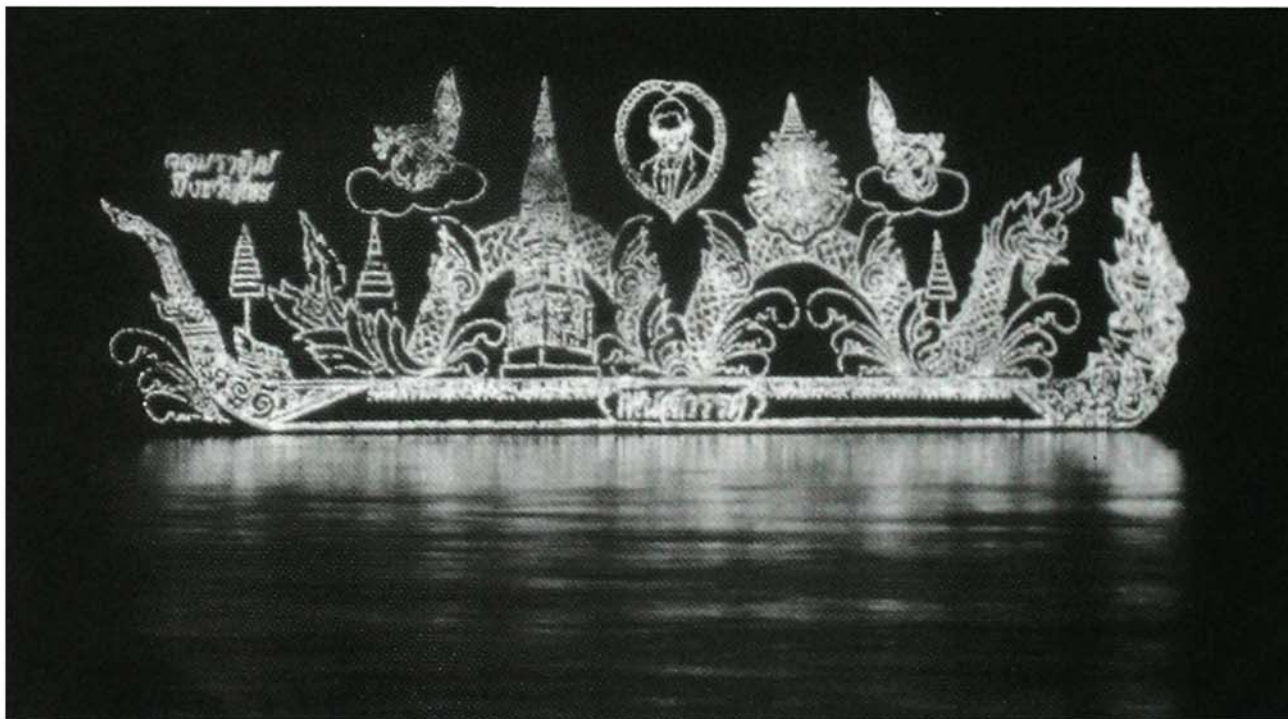
For several years, Ms. Iverson has been a selfless promoter of Thailand in particular and Southeast Asia in general. Since the mid-1990's, she has spearheaded the American Women's Club's Scholarship Programme, which targets rural girls who did not have the opportunity to further their education. She also leads annual excursions to some of her favourite destinations, usually little known and out of the way but vibrant, colourful communities.

Her tireless efforts with the Scholarship Programme have had a profound effect on her photography and appreciation of Southeast Asia. On several occasions, she visited some of the girls and their families. Immediately struck by the hospitality shown towards a complete stranger, she was equally taken by the diversity from girl

to girl, family to family, village to village. "A lot of [families] came from Laos or Cambodia," she reasons, "so how they lived were quite different too."

These initial forays were the spark that set off Ms. Iverson's passion. An explorer at heart, she became devoted to seeing the tiny communities that are spread all throughout Thailand. She stumbled upon the celebrations of many of these villages. "You don't hear about [the festivals], you just happen to be in the right place at the right time and something is taking place and it's fabulous."

"Each festival has stories and unique flavours" she says, citing how they can vary drastically from one village to the next. Buddhism, agriculture, New Year, courtship rituals, rights of passage, marriages and even



*Fireboat Festival: fireboats are constructed from bamboo scaffolding, with some boats reaching the height of six stories high*

funerals are among the celebrations that the explorer can wander into without prior notice.”

Of course, what can be a joy to behold for the adventuresome can be a veritable migraine for those who plan their trips down to the letter. Ms. Iverson herself has led tour groups to villages with the understanding that a festival would take place, only to find otherwise. Regarding the ambiguous dates of some celebrations, she shrugs, “nobody has control over it except for the village itself but it is really special because of that.”

Her interest in Thai festivals began a few years ago when she attended the annual Rocket Festival in Yasothon, Northeast Thailand. She had spent the bulk of the day watching the homemade rockets being launched into the air (not to mention a few that didn't quite make it), and by late afternoon, she toured the village on a samlor (motor trishaw). “I told the samlor driver to take me ‘Pai-Thieo’, which means ‘go anywhere’ (to wander for fun),” she recounts with obvious delight. She ended up being taken “through some of the back streets where families were gathered, kids were out in the streets playing and it was just such a wonderful feeling seeing the real lives of the people.”

As a foreigner in Yasothon, Ms. Iverson has almost the entire town to explore. “It's right smack in the middle of the province,” she points out, “there's no train that goes there, no flights.” While relishing the obscurity of it all, she quickly came to realise that far too many visitors to Thailand are missing out on such unique events. “[Expats and tourists] need to get out and learn a little about the culture and the only way they can do that is by experiencing it.”

The culmination of her pursuits, and the photographs that accompany them, is the Celebration Series which took her throughout Thailand and to six small festivals:

Chinese New Year in Bangkok and Nakhon Sawan; the Rocket Festival in Yasothon; the Ghost Festival in Dan Sai, Loei Province; the Fireboat Festival in Nakhon Phanom; the Wax Castle Festival in Sakhon Nakhon; and the Elephant Round-up in Surin, Isan.

“I'll first go in and experience them,” she explains how she started, “wandering around, taking photos, smiling, visiting as much as I can.” She makes a concerted effort to be as close to the people as possible, to walk among them. “I put a smile on my face, relax and thoroughly enjoy myself, and people



*Surin Elephant Show: an elephant giving a solo performance*

relate to that.” Or, as a fellow photographer and friend recently told her, “I’ve been with you at different places and the people just open up as you glide through the crowds.”

It is only after she has acquired a feel for the festival that the serious research begins.

Largely self-taught, Ms. Iverson admits that she’s not the type of person “who sets up a photo; it’s something that’s [part of a] happening.” She acts spontaneously and takes a seemingly endless number of pictures. “I have to be prepared because at any moment I can see something I enjoy and I am going to get it.”



*Jane's exhibition 'Celebrating Thai Style - Festivals of Thailand' at the Neilson Hays Library, Bangkok. Photograph by Nipon Sud-ngam*

This confident statement is very Jane Iverson. Her genial, friendly nature often obscures a rock-solid determination to succeed. She uses “whens” rather than “ifs” when discussing future plans and even her habit of taking a countless supply of photographs comes from a relentless desire to “capture that special moment.”

Those special moments are so rare and elusive, she concedes, that, while she can easily go through twenty rolls of film at a single event, she considers herself “lucky” to get six displayable shots out of them.

Ms. Iverson possesses the ability to get the best out of her subjects, capturing subtleties such as facial expressions, the colours that abound or even the food consumed.



*Chinese New Year: offerings of food, incense, candles and tea*

No detail is too small. Indeed, among the memorable pictures of fireboats, wax castles and elephants there are just as many that seem incidental to the events in question: children at play, vendors and hawkers, smiling faces.



*Chinese New Year in Nakhon Sawan: majestic head of the mythical dragon*

As ever, Ms. Iverson's agenda is well and truly booked for the next few years. The immediate future will be devoted to an Asian Celebration Series, once again devoted to unique festivals, only this time throughout Southeast Asia as a whole. Initially attracted to the diversity of the festivities, it is now, ironically, the homogeneous characteristics that she hopes to emphasise. "They all come together somehow and it's going to be interesting on how I work this," she states, unsure of quite what direction to take. A gut feeling says she will figure out a way.

Long-term, her plans are even more ambitious and promising. Of particular note is the series of "cultural children's books" she plans to compose, which will use Southeast Asia's rich historical tapestry to create adventures spanning the centuries.

Be it prolific photojournalist, supporter of higher education, travel guide or future children's books author, Jane Iverson has done an admirable amount to promote Thailand and Asia to the world. For her part, she describes her efforts as her chance to "give back." Why does she feel the need to do so? "Thai people love to smile and are just so welcoming. I love Thailand. I love Asia."

*All photographs by Jane Iverson except top photo on page 25*