



## **'Everyday' Puppets Ka Bong Way - Laos**

*The middle-eyed "Anatole"*

**Imogen Butler-Cole** wanders into a wildly imaginative world of puppet theatre in Vientiane that is quite unlike any other in Southeast Asia, and manages to un-attach herself from its mesmerizing hold, to tell the story.

Upon entering the company studio of Ka Bong Laos where practice is in session, I see what appear to be nothing more than dead coconut branches lying on a long trestle table in the centre of the room. When I question their presence, I am informed that they are to become the "new children" of the group. And right there, in front of my eyes, indeed they do. With the addition of only a few gnarled pieces of husk and shell for eyes, they spring into eerie, petrified life. Being in the space is in some ways like being in a morgue; everywhere are hanging inanimate, though intensely individual, beings; their faces frozen in quirky or malevolent expression; their bodies hanging limp, paralysed. Only when the act begins and the vital energy of the performer is transmitted into the otherwise flaccid conglomeration of cloth and wood, are these endearing children allowed their chance to play. Leuthmany is a slight and apparently unassuming man whose lifetime of experience popular theatre and clowning suddenly becomes vividly apparent when, eyes ablaze, he springs up to demonstrate a

Located within the tropics, Laos is - in the heart of Indochina - landlocked between China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Rivers and mountains and thick tropical forests dominate the landscape of the country which covers 236,000 sq km. Close to half of its population, which is estimated at 5 million, are ethnic Lao or Lao Loum. Officially, there are more than 60 ethnic groups, with their distinct languages, cultural traditions, and performing arts that are primarily related to their festivals. On New Year or Buddhist Lent days, for example, the Ipok show consists of puppetry which is performed by artists who have inherited the art form from previous generations. The show has been held for hundreds of years, and originated in the Luang Prabang province. Most of the puppets used in performances today are inspired by the Ipok tradition. According to Phouvieng Sisouphanh, glove puppetry, with plots of legendary and historical backgrounds that are similar to the Javanese Wayang Kulit in Indonesia, had flourished in Luang Prabang. The tradition was revived during the late 1970s with Bulgarian assistance. Since founding the national puppet troupe, the government has sent young performers to train in Bulgaria.

gesture, or to manipulate one of the many puppets (considered within the troupe rather as members of an ever expanding family).

Ka Bong Laos is a unique art form of puppetry which uses everyday objects, such as coconut shells, bamboo poles, brooms, scraps of material and even plastic bags in the creation of mask forms and bizarre, vibrant puppets full of character. The origins of this performing company arose through a friendship and collaboration between the company director (and sole creator of the Ka Bong people), Leuthmany Insisiegmay; and Michael Lebon, a highly respected French practitioner of physical theatre, and director of Turak, the French Theatre d'Objets. They had met at Hong Kanyasin, the Laos National Circus, where they performed together as

clowns for several years. There Lebon passed on his methods and expertise to Insisiegmay; who in turn used them to form the basis of his own company.

Recruiting through an extensive audition process, the three-year-old group now consists of performers with experience in circus, puppetry and popular theatre. Initially, Leuthmany and Lebon dedicated three months to developing their skills in applying the circus 'circle' method, through which the performers undergo rigorous training in mime, character, and physicality. Consequently, the ensemble was tightened; this is vital for a discipline in which up to three performers have joint control of one of the (often larger than life-size) puppets, rapidly switching from controlling one limb to

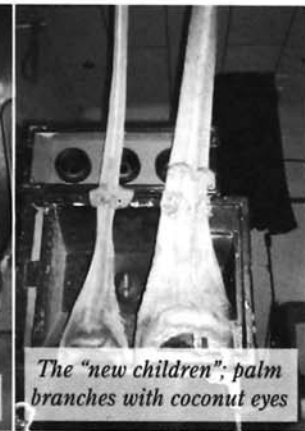
another, in a bid to maintain the most fluid and effective manipulation possible.

The company operate under the umbrella of the Laos National Puppet Theatre, and perform traditional work with hand-sewn, string-operated puppets. The troupe has been divided into two groups: Puppet theatre; and Theatre d'objets (a kind of theatre performed with recycled materials). Ka Bong is supported by organizations, such as UNICEF and Handicap International. UNICEF commissions educational work on topics such as AIDS, drug use and cluster bombs; while the performances in schools throughout the country, promoting road-safety awareness, are connected to Handicap International. Here, the performers act as a support band for the presenters of the project, providing comic relief from the more serious aspects of the programme, and thereby arresting attention and effectively highlighting the importance of safety. Throughout a two-hour lecture, they perform three knee-knocking rock songs as a variety of trouser-tugging characters - from the long-haired bass-playing rocker; to the slightly more incongruous, flowing moustachioed Grandfather figure; and to austere, head-scarf sporting housewife - much to the glee of the teenage audience.

Their work is not confined to schools, though it is educational, almost without exception. When questioned on the future of the company, Leuthmany becomes elusive, and when I probe I find out why. They are very much at the mercy of their commissioning organisations and can only afford to embark on the complex developmental process of



*"The Spider" at rest*



*The "new children"; palm branches with coconut eyes*



*The infinitely variable "little Heads", made from a Hessian sack and coconut shells*



*Road-Safety awareness activity*



*Mr Souksakhone giving life to one of the simpler, one-man Ka Bong*



*Just one configuration of the "Little Heads" as they appear in performance, manipulated by Mr Lathanakone and Miss Lenthly*

a new show when they have a guaranteed production. Such is the quality of life embodied by these creatures that they are rarely reused from one show to the next, and certainly never tampered with once they have taken on full form. So, although shows are



*A young audience enchanted by the skills and inventiveness of this rare art form*      *The symbol of the project; brought to life by Leuthmany*



*These two-man puppets are embodied by one performer, while the other takes care of the head*



*Extreme right is the character depicting the drug, opium, in drug awareness campaigns*

always devised through improvisation and draw on the imagination and skill of all the performers involved, the story must be carefully conceived and the puppets

fashioned before this evolution can begin. Currently, Leuthmany is in the early stages of creating a new piece for February's National Holiday, which will be a representation of the Laos myth that explains the origins of the three major ethnic groups (Soung, Tung and Loum), who were released, one after the other, from a giant pear through a hole made in it with a red-hot poker.

Recently, in November, Leuthmany was invited to Thailand to participate in an international seminar and workshop on Southeast Asian performing arts, organised by SPAFA. He held workshops and also performed to fascinated audiences, jangling to life his trademark puppets of rags, coconut heads, and old shoes. Leuthmany's comic streak had no bounds; at one moment during the seminar, when he was fielding questions from participants, he slowly lowered himself and hid behind the rostrum as he did not know how to answer a particular question, setting off all-round laughter.

Another priority for the future of Ka Bong Laos is to expand their already strong international reputation. They have not only toured Thailand with the support of L'Alliance Francaise, but also spent three months travelling around France, developing a show which questioned "the different worlds existing between France and Laos." This was performed at the 2002 International Puppetry Festival in Portugal where they enjoyed resoundingly enthusiastic responses from a discerning multinational audience. As Leuthmany points out, this art form crosses boundaries of linguistic understanding.



Photo: Nipon Sud-Ngam

*SPAFA Workshop*

All of Ka Bong's work is in the genre of mime - often accompanied by atmospheric international music - which allows it to be enjoyed by anyone, regardless of nationality. Mimed work has the added advantage of encouraging the audience to create their own dialogue for the characters. It would be fascinating to discover how many differently voiced dialogues are being played out in

the heads of the observers. Certainly there are glimpses of them in the performers, occasionally betrayed by the characteristic mumblings and exclamations which escape their lips from time to time. Such lapses augment the remarkably three-dimensional world inhabited by, say, the intricately varied rolling-and-folding acrobatics of a hessian sack with a coconut shell face.

Quite aside from the unique resourcefulness and originality displayed in the creation of these marvellous beings (where else could an egg box, three bottle-tops and two old toothbrush heads be put to such spectacular good use?), there is an added charm given by the manner in which they are manipulated. There are no screens to hide the performers, nor are they shrouded within the robes of their marionettes, so while they are not in any way distracting, they are clearly visible - their own expressions adding further depth to the life of the characters they portray. And in turn, this visibility of the performers, teamed with the everyday accessibility of the creative materials, must surely add to the audience's inclination to ape the entertainers and create Ka Bong of their own.

When I put this to Leuthmany, and question whether being a predominantly educative group, they teach their audiences how to create and manipulate puppets themselves, he explains that, for the moment, they are busy practising and developing the art form itself; that they hope to be able in the future to pass on their methods to those who have so thoroughly appreciated their shows. I have a feeling, though, that even without trying, Ka Bong Laos leaves behind it a trail of individuals, both young and old, who see miraculous new uses for the bounty with which nature provides them, and finding enticing new reasons to plunder the store of utensils to be found around the home. I myself, upon leaving the theatre, catch myself taking second glances at coconut trees, certain that there are many little faces watching me...

According to the publication, 'Asian Puppets, Wall of the World', it is said that Asian puppetry, essentially rooted in Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic traditions, has been a pervasive folk theatre contributing to the "oral transmission of doctrine and myth to illiterate populations." As an art form that had not been documented or preserved in books or museums until recently, the puppeteers "are generally more concerned with vitalizing the stories than with gaining the adulation of their audiences." Puppetry must have existed long before the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when puppets had been referred to in metaphors and similes; accepting that there was probably no single source of the origin of puppetry, it appears that it might have developed independently in many places, such as India and China, from where it spread to other parts of Asia. The oldest written source to mention puppetry in India is the Mahabharata, the great Indian classic epic which has been dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C..

Since training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (1996 - 1999), Imogen has performed and directed extensively in London, throughout the UK, and on tour in France and New Zealand. She frequently works with The Spontaneity Shop, one of London's foremost improvisation companies; and has played lead roles in several films. Having studied performance internationally, writing articles, scripts and sketches, Imogen has devised and directed workshops on Shakespeare for international students and teachers at Oxford University. Recently, she was involved in a specially commissioned drama project at the College of Dramatic Arts in Bangkok, and is currently directing theatre in Delhi, India before moving to Kolkata to work with theatre- and education-based NGOs.

Photographs by Imogen Butler-Cole except those on page 9

SPAFA will organise an international puppet festival in 2005. For more information, please contact [spafa03@yahoo.com](mailto:spafa03@yahoo.com)

*"Bamboo Man"; Leuthmany, Lathanakone and Lemthy in action*



*This gentleman's legs are those of the performer, who directs the rest of the body from outside of the coat*



*Bamboo and coconut can make an endearing and undemanding pet!*



*The options are endless, given a few plastic bags and a spark of imagination*



*A housewife; appropriately crafted from a variety of household goods*



*The trouser-tugging grandfather in a more formal pose; Lathanakone and Suksakhone each giving a hand*



*Backstreet, Phnom Penh*



*Rice Planting, Mae Faek*



*Approaching Storm, Koh Samui*



*Home Studio of Artist*