

# The Mekong Goes Global: International Festivals/ Regional Gatherings

Theatre professor and reporter **Catherine Diamond** traverses Southeast Asia to participate in performing arts events

## Mekong Arts Festival in Phnom Penh

**T**he end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 have seen a burgeoning of international performing arts festivals all over the ASEAN region, revealing the increased networking amongst Southeast Asian artists and the forging of a recognized and shared “Mekong” regional identity. During the week 23-27 November 2009, Phnom Penh hosted sixty performers at the fifth Mekong Arts and Media Festival organized by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) that has expanded its offices to Thailand. The “Weaving Cultures, Weaving Lives” festival included pageants on the capital’s streets, workshops and performances as groups from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar focused on the role of youth theatre. Events started with a seminar in which most of the scholars and directors talked about the integration of their cultures. With sponsorship and coordination of various NGOs, the workshops and performances used a variety of



*Two circus artists from Phare Ponleu Selpak Cambodia in the performance of “Puthou” at the Mekong Festival in Phnom Penh. Photo: Phoonsab Thevongsa, courtesy of PETA Mekong Partnership Program*



*The cast of the PETA's “Ismail and Isabel” restaged for the closing night of the Mekong Festival in Phnom Penh. Photo: Phoonsab Thevongsa, courtesy of PETA Mekong Partnership Program*

traditional and contemporary arts to educate about HIV-Aids and trafficking. As many of the troupes involved were supported by NGOs in presenting works with specific themes, they have built up repertoires around health and education issues, but the festival allowed them to view what others were doing. Directed primarily at children and young people, several works focused on teenage gender relations and identity, such as the Hanoi-based Youth Theatre's production of *Stereo Man*, created by Filipino choreographer Agnes Locsin, that explored homo-eroticism, images of masculinity and violence – issues rarely directly tackled in the Vietnamese media or stage. Many of the Cambodian participants were from Phare Ponleu Selpak (the Brightness of Art), a group that started informally in 1986 in a refugee camp on the Thai border, and has trained its members in circus acrobatics. It presented *Les Ballayette*, a song-and-dance piece about expanding young women's view of their life choices. Incorporating shadow puppets, marionettes, traditional myths, and contemporary social issues, the performances took place in the Chaktomuk Hall, Phnom Penh's premiere venue, or outdoors in the theatre's gardens, and were part of the ongoing rebuilding of Cambodia's performing arts culture.



*Hanoi's Youth Theatre's presentation of "Stereo Man" restaged at the Mekong Festival in Phnom Penh. Photo: Courtesy of Youth Theatre of Vietnam*



*Hanoi's Youth Theatre's presentation of "Stereo Man" restaged at the Mekong Festival in Phnom Penh. Photo: Courtesy of Youth Theatre of Vietnam*



## **Dance Festival in Vientiane/Luang Prabang**

Between 20 and 31 January, Laos held the 'Fang Mae Khong' (Mekong), its first International Dance Festival in Vientiane and Luang Prabang that featured traditional, contemporary and hip-hop dance. Although the categories were distinct in the program, dancers from France, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos often demonstrated their creativity in the fusions of all three styles. In addition to group and solo performances, workshops were offered to the public, and a hip-hop competition attracted a large crowd. The festival was co-sponsored by the Lao Bang Fai dance group and the French company A'Corps to transcend borders and encourage performers and spectators to "Listen to the Mekong River." Lao Bang Fai consists of young hip-hop dancers who have previously been involved in Handicap International's projects in Laos.

Although the government initially discouraged it because it had no roots in Lao culture, and threatens traditional music, hip-hop is extremely popular in Laos. The dance form is now recognized as a vehicle for original Lao creation, replacing the previous dominance of Thai and Western pop music. Lao hip-hop dancers proudly point out that their expertise has put the country on the map, and made Laos known in international hip-hop circles. At the same time, they are both bolstering the small country's culture by instilling pride in original songs and creativity in the hip-hop medium, and dismantling contentious boundaries with their immediate neighbors, by reinforcing their shared Mekong identity. Perhaps hip-hop's exuberant acrobatics and lack of overt sexuality has allowed it to be seen as an exercise of youthful high spirits rather than foreign cultural corruption. Government authorities make sure that the song lyrics and performers' dress do not transgress Lao norms. That the first days of the Fang Mae Khong festival were held on the grounds of the circus school emphasized the spectacular acrobatic aspects of the dance, and the final performances filling the 1,500-seat National Cultural Hall demonstrated its overwhelming popularity. The country's famous literatus Somsanouk Mixay commented that the people of the Mekong River "have many things in common but they have their ancient and rich culture of their own. One aspect of their culture is dance, which was very rich and diverse as well."<sup>1</sup> The common cultural heritage of

the young people of the Mekong now includes a passion for hip-hop, and it, alongside traditional dance, was incorporated in Vientiane's celebration of its 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary as the capital of the ancient Lan Xang kingdom.



*Krit Chaisinboon as Phra Lor dances with Puen Keaw (Potjana Phattong) and Pang Thong (Maneerat Ratanang) in Phra Lor. Photo: Thanis Studio, courtesy of Patravadi Theatre*

## Fringe Festival in Hua Hin

The 10<sup>th</sup> year of Thailand's International Fringe Festival, annually sponsored by Patravadi Medjudhon at her performing arts center on the banks of Bangkok's Chao Phraya river, was instead held in the resort town of Hua Hin to celebrate the inauguration of her new Vic Hua Hin Performing Arts Complex. Her latest play, a musical drama based on the classical *lilit* poem, *Phra Lor*, opened the 320-seat theatre. Patravadi has been in the forefront of adapting Thai

literary classics to make them relevant to contemporary audiences and attractive to young people. The famous love story between a prince and two princesses from the North of Thailand incorporated lanna and *khon* traditional dance along with hip-hop and aerial acrobatics. *Phra Lor* is a literary classic written during the Ayutthaya period over 500 years ago, narrating a tale of war, revenge, magic, and passion. While it was being staged indoors, Burmese dancers were performing the candle dance in the outdoor dance space, and northern Thai musicians played the *khaen* pipes. A workshop on paper-cutting drew participants who were sampling the delicacies at the food stalls on the grounds. French textile artist Nicole Lamarche, who offered workshops on the use of herbal dyes, was one of the guests who stayed in the unique igloo-like apartments for visiting artists.

This time the festival featured troupes from outside Southeast Asia, such as comic performer Yael Rasooly from Israel, glove puppets from Taiwan, and the American contemporary dance troupe ODC that was

*Violinist Kyle Dillingham as Phra Lor in Phra Lor. Photo: Chattiya Thaipirosamukkee, courtesy of Patravadi Theatre*



*Sarawut Martthong playing the Director in Phra Lor, holds up the Phra Lor mask. Photo: Chattiya Thaipirosamukkee, courtesy of Patravadi Theatre*





*Patravadi Medjudhon starring  
as the Grandmother in Phra Lor,  
which she directed and adapted.  
Photo: Chattiya Thaipirosamukkee,  
courtesy of Patravadi Theatre*

touring the region. While a few Thai performers, such as Pichet Klunchun, a soloist famous for his experiments in *khon* dance, were featured, there was a noted absence of Thai theatre groups that previously appeared at the Fringe when it was held in Bangkok. The move, however, is in line with a new national policy to culturally develop other areas in the country rather than focus solely on the capital. In the future, perhaps more troupes will venture south to Hua Hin, while in the meantime, the intention of the complex is to stimulate participation in the arts in the vicinity, and promote year-round cultural activities.

## Performance Art Festival in Yangon

Over the past decade, Myanmar has been making news in the art world for the imaginative work of its visual artists in dramatic performance, and festivals such as 'Beyond Pressure: Festival of Performance Art' have been organised in Yangon. In 2009, the second 'Beyond Pressure' took place in the city between 2 and 6 December with predominantly Asian participants. Solo artists from Thailand, India, Korea, Japan, China, and Vietnam as well many Burmese performance artists, including organizer Moe Satt, participated in the event. For three days, they conducted workshops, and on the last two days they performed in the Sein Lan So Pyay Garden, a park beside Inya Lake. Foreign performers have previously not been allowed to perform publicly in Myanmar, but the festival broke new ground by applying for and receiving permission to perform in public. The participants realized that showing and explaining their works to the censorship officials was instructive performance in itself.

Since performance art is visually oriented and has no narrative, it is open to a wide variety of interpretations, such as Moe Satt's "Mr. Happy" in which he handed everyone colored ping pong balls on which to draw smiley faces. He then invited people to stick them on his face while Natalie Cole's song "Smile" played in the background. A young emerging international artist, Moe Satt is one of the members of the Gangaw Village Artist Group in Myanmar, and has been very

active in the international performance art scene in recent years. In another performance, "O! Picnic (Beyond Pleasure)", by local artist Mrat Lunn Htwann, members of the audience were requested to hold a banner with the Burmese word 'ha' repeatedly printed on it. They were then requested to laugh one-by-one into a megaphone, while the artist standing on the other side of the banner



*Audience participation in Mrat Lunn Htwann's O! Picnic (Beyond Pleasure) at Yangon's Beyond Pressure Performance Art Festival*

*Photo: Courtesy of Moe Satt*



*Mrat Lunn Htwann's O! Picnic (Beyond Pleasure) at Yangon's Beyond Pressure Performance Art Festival*  
*Photo: Courtesy of Moe Satt*



imitated each laugh also through a megaphone. This generated a lot of genuine laughter while some of the works received bemused looks or amazement such as that of Korean Soni Kum who arose from being buried in the dirt to be an ephemeral figure dressed in flowing white.

Despite public accessibility to the festival, Moe Satt said that the absence of many of the well-known Burmese performance artists and the small number of spectators – even though the second night attracted more than the first – was a disappointing aspect of the event. The reputation of ‘Beyond Pressure’, nevertheless, continues to stimulate interest internationally.



*Mrat Lunn Htwann's O! Picnic  
(Beyond Pleasure) at Yangon's  
Beyond Pressure Performance  
Art Festival  
Photo: Courtesy of Moe Satt*

## Contemporary Theatre Festival in Yangon

Two months later, between 5 and 13 February, the Alliance Française, with additional sponsorship from the Goethe Institute, launched the second iUi-#02 (initiating, updating, integrating) International Festival of Contemporary Theatre. The brainchild of Nyan Lin Htet, the Burmese director of the Paris-based Theatre of the Disturbed, the first festival was held in 2008, and was so enjoyed by both local and foreign participants that many returned for the second. Nyan Lin Htet is recognised as a prominent promoter of contemporary art and theatre in Myanmar, and has directed dramatic works by Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and Eugene Ionesco.

The festival started with a seminar on the state of the arts in today's society, followed by four 5-day workshops held by foreign directors for local participants. The culmination was two evenings of performances of narrative and experimental theatre, puppetry, dance, video, and music.



*Top : Young Po and Baby Tiger meet in the forest in "Po and Tiger" at the iUi #02 International Festival of Contemporary Theatre-Myanmar in Yangon  
Photo: Thu Rein, courtesy of the Theatre of the Disturbed.*

*Middle : The audience attending the iUi #02 International Festival of Contemporary Theatre-Myanmar at the Alliance Francaise in Yangon.  
Photo: Thu Rein, courtesy of the Theatre of the Disturbed.*

*Bottom : Adult Po and Big Tiger argue about "debt of gratitude" in "Po and Tiger" at the iUi #02 International Festival of Contemporary Theatre-Myanmar in Yangon.  
Photo: Thu Rein, courtesy of the Theatre of the Disturbed.*



status quo. The new version concluded with a twist in which the animals and trees complain about human cruelty and lack of recognition of their contributions, and ordered the tiger to eat Po.

For the workshop, the story was re-scripted (a la San Francisco Mime Troupe) to comically present the tiger's point of view, with the additional irony of being performed while Chinese drums signaling the Year of the Tiger pounded in the background. The nine participants translated the text in one day, memorized it the next, rehearsed it in two days, and then put together costumes, makeup and set to give a 40-minute performance in Burmese. A very proud and sensitive tiger informed his friend Po of the consequences of forest destruction and offered four alternative endings to the original conclusion.

*Untitled Lear* by director Ruth Pongstaphone of Dhamma Theatre West in New York/Berlin and Australian actor Ralph Coterill presented an adaptation of *King Lear* in English, which has never been publicly performed, even though it is one of the few Shakespearean plays that has been translated completely into Burmese. Uttered with powerful conviction by Coterill in a solo tour-de-force, the Shakespearean language might not have been understood by all, but the plight of an old man going insane from the loss of his identity was forcefully conveyed.

Manual Lutgenhorst, the German director of the Empty Space in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Khin Maung Htwe, a Burmese puppeteer, and Amy Trompetter, a mask maker (formerly of the Bread and Puppet theatre) adapted a well-known Burmese story by Khin Myo Chit. Their *Four Puppets* presented an updated version of a puppeteer whose son is swayed by the temptations of the big city. Before he goes, his father tells him to rely on the advice of his four puppets that would bring him first wealth and power, and later wisdom and happiness. The signature oversized *papier mache* masks of Bread and Puppet provided colorful interludes about the dangers of capitalism. Puppetry also featured in the presentation by U Ye Dway that reprised the traditional *Satitayma Sambula jataka* about the devotions of a princess whose husband is struck with leprosy, and an experimental work that combined Western and Burmese puppetry and dance in *Fragments* by Ye Nyi Nyi.



*Audience watching "Po and Tiger"  
at the iUi #02 International  
Festival of Contemporary Theatre  
Festival-Myanmar at the Alliance  
Francaise in Yangon.*

*Photo: Thu Rein, courtesy of the  
Theatre of the Disturbed.*

Solo performers included Moe Satt's performance art piece, *Hands*, that had been presented at the PETA festival. Burmese dancer Sithu Win who trained in France and Laos, performed a virtuoso dance that combined aspects of his multicultural training. Raka Maitra from Singapore also integrated her training in Orissi classical dance with contemporary movement and projections to present a deeply personal exploration. German video artist Patrick Palucki collaborated with Myanmar playwright U Lu Wa Lay to

create a video piece "Ediets" (Every day isn't exactly the same) in which Burmese participants examined the monotony of their everyday lives in three scenes. In one, Sisyphus-like, they moved stones from one side of the room to the other while projections of advertisements culled from the Yangon streets blasted exaggerated promises of a better life through consumerism.

Traditionally, dramatic performance has been very popular in Myanmar, but over the past decade it has declined. The all-night *zat pwe* that featured traditional song and dance, comedy routines, modern and classical plays, now focuses on pop music so that other items receive less performing time if not eliminated altogether. There is no place to see spoken drama on any regular basis, and even the National Theatre in Yangon is now used mostly for music concerts and not dramatic performance. English language students sometimes get together to perform plays in English for a limited and select audience. Although free and open to the public, such was unfortunately the case for iUi #02, which was not able to attract many "ordinary" people, who might have been intimidated by the foreign venue. It was only because the festival was held on "foreign" ambassadorial grounds, however, that it could take place without censorship. Frustration at such restrictions was demonstrated in Nyan's own performance art piece, *Waiting*, a *tableau vivant* of a man ironing his head on a table; another peeping from behind a huge box; Nyan himself inching his way across the stage in micro-steps, occasionally shouting "Happy New Year"; two girls, huddled and morose, periodically screamed in English: "I can't take it



anymore!", while a Burmese poet read the last words of people who had committed suicide. Most of the performances indirectly critiqued aspects of society, but this last piece symbolically represented a stalemate in the conflict between individual liberties and communal cohesion. Tellingly, during the joyous and creative collaborations in the workshops, such conflict was utterly absent.

All these festivals demonstrate the increase of Southeast Asian performing artists participating globally at international festivals as individuals, and their greater interest and mobility to come together regionally. Several of the festivals "suffered" growing pains because they attracted both returnees and new participants. In addition, some governments, initially suspicious of contemporary performance art and global popular culture, have found ways to incorporate them in their celebrations of national history and regional identity. Moreover, such festivals are opportunities to present contemporary and traditional arts side-by-side and allow practitioners to observe and learn how they can enrich each other. The workshops allow for free play and exploration in a given form. They provide an opportunity for the participants to bond even when they have little or no language in common by shifting the emphasis away from verbal communication to movement and visual expression. Less burdened with being national representatives of their cultures, the young performers are open to incorporating elements they see in others' work. At the same time, being recognized for their own accomplishments by their peers contributes to a sense of national pride.

As a result of such festivals, some Mekong dramatists are becoming more familiar with their counterparts in other countries than those within their national borders. At the Phnom Penh "Weaving Cultures" Festival, the director of Myanmar's Mandalay Marionettes, a troupe that frequently represents the country's traditional puppets at such festivals, Ma Ma Niang remarked: "I wish I could show the youth in my country how young artists are performing here. I think we need to change the performing arts in Myanmar. We cannot simply stick to the old traditional style."<sup>2</sup> Little did she know that in Yangon, young Burmese dramatists at Beyond Pressure and iUi #02 were engaged in wildly imaginative experiments on the edge of global performance.

## Notes

1. "First Hip-Hop International Dance kicked off," *Lao Voices*. 25 January 2010.  
<http://laovoices.com/2010/01/25/first-hip-hop-international-dance-kicked-off>
2. Chris Mony, "Asia: Artists Join Forces to Make a Difference in Mekong," 28 November 2009.  
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