

# LPFF goes from strength to strength

STORY: JOE CUMMINGS



PHOTO COURTESY OF LUANG PRABANG FILM FESTIVAL

The main screen of Luang Prabang Film Festival at the Handicraft Market.

**L**uang Prabang, the well-preserved northern capital of Laos, doesn't have a single working cinema. But over the first week of December, the streets of its Unesco-sanctioned historic district filled with cinephiles hailing from all over the region and beyond for the latest edition of Luang Prabang Film Festival, or LPFF.

Thirty-two feature films were screened, which ended on Dec 7, all of them from the Asean nations of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and of course Thailand.

Directed by American Gabriel Kuperman, a graduate of New York's New College in media studies who now works full-time for the Lao government's Department of Cinema, the non-profit festival aims to boost regional awareness of independent film.

"Without exposure to films like these, moviegoers and budding filmmakers are confined to the Hollywood model for the most part," says Kuperman. "We want to see more inspiration for young filmmakers as well as a more cohesive Southeast Asian film culture."

Film experts from each of the Asean nations act as Motion Picture Ambassadors for the festival, recommending up to 10 feature films each.

Each film was screened with its original native-language soundtrack, with English subs added. A programme of short films also appeared on this year's schedule, along with discussions and workshops.

The only prize given to filmmakers at the festival is one audience award.

"We operate the festival as a celebration of film, rather than a competition," says Kuperman.

This year's audience award went to a documentary film *Cambodian Son*.

Among the films representing Thailand was *Khun Pan*, Kongkiat Komesiri's sepia-tinged action feature following the exploits of early 20th-century Thai policeman (portrayed by Ananda Everingham), who meets his match in a southern Thai bandit warlord (Krissada Clapp Sukosol) in a battle of wits and powerful Thai magic. In a surprise festival appearance, Ananda introduced the film at its outdoor night market screening.

*Y/our Music*, an acclaimed documentary on Thai music directed by Waraluck Hiransretta-ware and David Reeve, also commanded a night-time slot.

Waraluck herself attended the festival this year for her first time.

"For me, it's definitely the coolest festival in the region," she says. "You get to meet filmmakers from neighbouring countries in an intimate setting. Unlike at larger festivals, no appointments are necessary, you just walk up and start talking."

Among three Lao films at the festival, *Banana Pancakes And Children Of The Sticky Rice* was chosen for opening night. Directed by Daan Veldhuizen, the beautifully shot feature tells the story of a group of backpackers who come upon a small

village in remote northern Laos in search of a traditional experience. The ensuing encounter between villagers and tourists ends up changing both groups.

"When we started the festival in 2010, there were only one or two Lao feature films per year being made," says festival director Kuperman. "Now it's up to four or five a year."

As in previous years, night-time screenings took place next to the Handicraft Market at the main intersection in town, with outdoor seating for up to 1,500. During the day, events shifted to Sofitel Luang Prabang, where two renovated Lao wooden homes hosted features, documentaries and shorts from around the region.

Discussions and workshops took place on the lawn between the two buildings. In one of the most exciting new developments this year, visiting members of the Tribeca Film Institute led an LPFF Talent Lab on Grant Writing and Project Pitching.