

Luang Prabang Film Fest Shines Light on Southeast Asian Cinema



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by Clarence Tsui 12/16/2013

The fourth edition of the Laotian event -- in the country that has just one cinema -- featured an expanded screening schedule, industry panels and an inaugural funding program for local filmmakers.

LUANG PRABANG, Laos -- Cannes brandishes its palm leaf, Venice roars with a regal lion and Berlin makes its stand via a towering brown bear: usually, international film festivals promote their positions with logos symbolizing poise, prestige and power. It comes as something of a surprise then that an event would choose to make its mark in the circuit with the image of a plastic chair -- and not a fancy designer artifact à la Eames or Starck, too, but the humble, stackable kind variety that one finds in community halls and fast-food courts across Asia.

But this is precisely the image the fourth edition of the Luang Prabang Film Festival, which ran Dec. 7-11, chose to represent itself with. Once on the ground in Laos, however, the choice of logo began to make more sense: blue plastic chairs are omnipresent in the Laotian city throughout the event's duration, as hundreds of them are laid out in the downtown piazza every eve-

ning as seating for those attending the festival's nighttime screenings.

As locals -- who have been deprived of the film-going experience for nearly three decades after the last remaining theater in the city, the Sieng Savan, shuttered in the 1980s -- and tourists took their seats alongside each other each evening for some entertainment, their enthusiastic reception to, say, the latest Thai romantic-comedy, Malaysian melodrama or Laotian paranormal thriller, gave shape to the festival's slogan of "celebrating Southeast Asian cinema." It wasn't necessarily the latest, best or most cutting-edge of the region's film output, it's true; but the event indeed provided a platform to showcase the variety and energy of what is possibly the most vibrant filmmaking scene in the world today.

Some of the balance the programmers are trying to strike, was evident in a last-minute

change, when the festival replaced its original opening film *Big Heart* (a confused-teens drama by first-time director **Mattipob Douangmyxay**) with the crowd-pleasing romantic comedy *I Love Savanh*.

The latest entry in what can now be seen as a distinct Laotian genre -- the rom-com revolving around a foreigner falling in love with a local woman in a Laotian city (*Good Morning Luang Prabang* (2008), the first commercial film to be produced in communist Laos, was soon followed by *From Pakse with Love* (2010) and then *Lao Wedding* (2011)) -- *Savanh* is set in the southern city of Savannakhet ("Savanh"), with the central romance set between a young Japanese textiles buyer (**Yuki Morino**) and a local skirt designer (**Latdavan Thepvongsa**).

Ticking off all the generic tropes -- the awkward meet-cute, the courtship, the misunderstanding and separation, and finally the inevitable reconciliation and marriage -- *I Love Savanh* also serves as a very explicit showcase of both the city as a budding economic center (as seen in the introduction of its weaving business, and images of modernity in the shape of the largely Japanese-funded Friendship Bridge, linking the city with Thailand) and tourist haven (with the Japanese lead character being shown around the city's older neighborhoods and also the bucolic beauty of its rural environs). Director **Bounthong Nhotmankoung's** thinly-veiled approach in grafting all this onto the narrative reflects the rudimentary production values of the film, but the very fact that local filmmakers are now following fads and commercial conventions perhaps signposts the emergence of a normative industry system.

Another genre very much present in Laotian cinema (and, specifically, in the Luang Prabang festival itself, which premiered the now festival-travelling *Chantaly* last year) is horror. A spine-tingler again took center stage here this year in *Red Scarf*. Released in Laos last year, the film was directed by **Sakchai Deenan**, the canny Thai producer-filmmaker who kickstarted the cross-cultural romance craze with his *Good Morning*

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Luang Prabang and the like. Set in the Laotian countryside 30 years ago, the story revolves around a young rural herbalist who goes to town to learn more about medicine but returns home sporting the titular item on his neck, while at the same time rumors swirl around the village about the appearance of a headless ghost around his house.

This homecoming theme was also central to *Hak Aum Lum*, another Laotian film at the festival. While not exactly a ghost story, **Phanumad Disattha's** film is similar to *Red Scarf* in its depiction of a man returning from the city to his home village to confront some unspeakable truth: tired of his life as a pop singer, Sack travels home and is immediately reacquainted with the warmth of his childhood habitat and the sight of the girlfriend he spurned to pursue fame and fortune. His attempt to atone for his past misdeeds is made complicated as his record company employers arrive to make him pay for breaking his contract – and true to style, all's well that ends well.

All three of these crowd-pleasers (or scarers) were received warmly at the night screenings, perhaps partly as a show of support for the Laotian film industry, which is slowly finding its feet after nearly two decades of virtual inactivity, with no local productions emerging between 1988 (when the state-backed production *Red Lotus* was produced) and 2008 (when the first privately-funded Laotian film, *Good Morning Luang Prabang*, was released). As of today, only one cinema exists in the whole of Laos, a two-house cineplex in the capital Vientiane.

This lack of cinema in the country might also explain the reception of the similarly mainstream foreign productions shown at the open-air venue, such as the Thai rite-of-passage comedy *Grean Fictions* or Malaysian film *Kil*, about a young man having second thoughts about having paid to have himself assassinated by a hitmen's agency, after he falls for a young woman.

Selected by a team of "motion picture ambassadors" – comprising producers, directors and critics from around the region – the programming at the Luang Prapang fest is understandably still a bit hit and miss in quality; some entries, such as the Malay-

sian horror film *The Hidden: Wrath of Azazil*, were as much an incoherent mind-scratcher as Singapore's *Ah Boys to Men* was a TV-film-writ-large (but a big hit at home nevertheless).

Still, for the first time, the festival came up with a selection covering all the Asean nations – rounding out the list was *What Is It About Rina?*, the first-ever entirely indigenous-staffed and financed feature film from Brunei. The event was more about representation and cultural expression, a virtue evidenced by the very diverse tenor and ideology of the two Vietnamese entries: the overtly government-line war film *The Scent of Burning Grass* and the more impressionistic *Here... or There?*, a fantastical treatise about an European man's dream about Vietnam by the Geneva-based director **Siu Pham**.

But the festival, which was founded by its Luang Prabang-based American director **Gabriel Kuperman**, is also seeking to become an incubator too, by nurturing tastes for more alternative fare and by serving as a filmmakers' network for Southeast Asia.

The former aim is represented by the daytime screenings, which took place at Aman-taka, an exquisite resort which sponsors the festival and houses some of the visiting guests. The films shown in projections in one of the hotel's function rooms include festival-acclaimed pieces such as **Nontawat Numbenchapol's** Locarno competition contestant *Boundary*, **Brillante Mendoza's** *Thy Womb*, **Dwi Sujanti Nugraheni's** IDFA entry *Denok* and *Gareng*, **Kalyanee Mam's** *A River Changes Course* and **Mouly Surya's** *What They Don't Talk About When They Talk About Love*.

Nontawat, Dwi and Kalyanee were all present for Q&As – appearances that ran alongside two industry panels, which also took place at the Amantaka, about distribution methods for Southeast Asian filmmakers and fund-raising strategies for independent productions in the region. Furthering this foray, the festival this year inaugurated its first edition of the Lao Filmmakers' Fund, with the event's board of directors awarding grants to Laotian filmmakers **Dissatha** (of *Hak Aum Lum*) and **Phonevelay Keo-**

paseuth for their upcoming projects.

In addition, the festival showcased the results of two of its workshops. *Our Lives on Film* was born out of an Asia Foundation-funded documentary-making program in September, in which instructors of the Humanitarian Media Agency worked with aspiring young filmmakers in a series of screenings, seminars and discussions. The novices were then sent out to shoot, and returned to the festival with very competent short films about an abbot talking about his calling, a single mother explaining her life collecting bottles on the street, a religious ritual aimed at feeding spirits, a look into Laos' Internet-junkie generation, and the art of traditional weaving.

Upstairs from the Visitors' Center screening room where the shorts were shown, the festival also hosted an exhibition presenting the the Southeast Asia Movie Theater Project, comprising photographs and explanatory texts of the mostly disused and dilapidated stand-alone cinemas dotting city suburbs and towns across Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. The brainchild of the cinephile **Philip Jablon**, who is now based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, the four-year-old project has accumulated documentation of over 200 of these venues; it's an exciting resource of information which the festival has rightly valued, and has now incorporated under its supervision with Jablon continuing his role as the project's sole researcher.

The festival's expansion was possibly confirmed by the presence of institutional and commercial sponsors: lining up alongside the Laotian government's film department, Unesco (Luang Prabang's town center is a designated heritage site) and the American embassy to Laos (with which the festival co-organizes the annual American Film Week in the capital Vientiane) are Laos' national airline and also Coca-Cola and Heineken. It remains to be seen whether such joined forces will help in fostering the cultural expression, mutual exchange, sustainable cinema industry and diversity that the festival advocates in its mission statement.