

Cinematic HERITAGE

SOUTHEAST ASIAN MOVIES ADD REGIONAL FLAIR TO LUANG PRABANG'S UNESCO CELEBRATION

WISE KWAI
THE NATION
LUANG PRABANG

A DIVERSE selection of movies from across Southeast Asia at the sixth Luang Prabang Film Festival made sure the Asean Economic Community was well represented during the 20th anniversary celebrations for the Lao former royal capital's designation as a Unesco World Heritage site.

As the Unesco celebration got underway with a parade through the historic town by the Elephant Caravan of 20 pachyderms, the five-day film fest wrapped up on Wednesday with a selection that included the drama "Crocodile" from the Philippines, which was filmed in another Unesco World Heritage site, Agusan Marsh in Mindanao, home to the world's largest captive crocodile, a creature measuring more than six metres. Director Francis Xavier Pasion's fact-based film, however, dealt more with the impoverished society of the marshlands, and the hardships faced by a mother after her teenage daughter was killed by a massive croc – likely not the one that was captured, said Pasion, who was one of several directors presenting their movies in Luang Prabang.

Highlights of the festival included "Spotlight on Cambodia", which devoted a full day of programming to that country's film industry, which has undergone revitalisation after its brutal dismantling by the Khmer Rouge and the many moribund decades that followed.

"I think in the 1980s and '90s, there wasn't any interest in film or culture," said Sok Visal, whose co-directed the Cambodian action-comedy "Gems on the Run" and serves as the country's "Motion Picture Ambassador" to the Luang Prabang Film Festival. "But things are better now, and there is a lot happening in film. The culture, it's in our blood."

Other Cambodian films ranged from documentaries, such as "The Cambodian Space Project: Not Easy Rock n' Roll", covering the revivals of Cambodia's vibrant 1970s pop-music scene, which also suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge; and the remarkable "Still I Strive", about orphans at the National Action Culture Association who are schooled in martial arts, dance and theatre. Narrative segments of "Still I Strive", had the talented youngsters vividly acting out an adventure drama set during the Angkorian times. More action was on hand with the martial-arts revenge tale "Hanuman". And there was Cambodia's submission to the Oscars, "The Last Reel", a drama that addresses the country's lost cinematic heritage and bloody Khmer Rouge past.

Laos' emerging film industry was represented by several new films, including the world premiere of "Above It All", a drama by Anaysy Keola, making his sophomore feature effort following the crime thriller "At the Horizon". A groundbreaking film, it mixes two taboo topics, one about a gay medical student and his strug-



Lao-American director Mattie Do, second from left, faces her cast and crew from her latest feature "Dearest Sister". They are actress Vilouna Phetmany, actor-producer Douangmany Soliphanh and producer Keith Vieira.



Thai director Boonsong Nakphoo presents "Village of Hope" on the main screen.



The Thai-Lao co-production "My Teacher" is screened at the festival's main venue, the yard of Luang Prabang Primary School, in the heart of the city's heritage district.

gles to come out of the closet, and the other about a young Hmong woman who wants to break from eons-old tradition and marry for love, not out of arrangement.

There was a special "work print preview" of "Dearest Sister", a taut psy-

chological thriller that's the sophomore feature effort from the First Lady of Lao cinema, Lao-American director Mattie Do, who made her debut at the festival in 2012 with the ghost story "Chanthaly". She took "Sister" to the Cannes Film Market and found back-

ers from Estonia and France, making her new thriller the first Lao-European feature-film co-production. She was recently in Singapore where her third feature, "The Long Walk" was among projects backed by the fledgling Southeast Asian Film Financing Forum. It'll be "science fiction", Mattie says.

And more-standard commercial fare from Laos pleased the local audience in the outdoor venue, which had double-feature screenings nightly in the yard of the Luang Prabang Primary School. The selections ranged from the comedy-horror-romance "Huk Ey Ly 2" to mainstream romance in "I Love You".

By day, the festival screened selections in a Lao-style wooden house on the grounds of the Sofitel, a historic former French fortress remade into a five-star hotel.

Selections there included the hard-hitting documentaries "The Act of Killing" and "The Look of Silence", covering politically motivated genocide in Indonesia in the 1960s.

Thai filmmakers were well-represented, with director Tom Waller and his producer Katrina Grose presenting "The Last Executioner", the award-winning biopic of Thai prison triggerman Chavoret Jaruboon. Director Krisda Tipchaimeta and his team from the acclaimed documentary "Somboon" were there to show the tender side of Thai society with their story of an elderly man devoted to caring for his terminally ailing wife of 45 years.

And director Boonsong Nakphoo took the main stage downtown to present "Village of Hope", a black-and-white social realism drama set in his hometown of Wangphikul, Sukhothai (just a stone's throw from another World Heritage site). With a remarkable cast of Boonsong's family, friends and neighbours as actors, it's profile of a down-at-the-heels community that has been left behind. The title of the movie is meant to be ironic, Boonsong had to explain.