

Cambodia UNCLASSIFIED

THE COUNTRY'S RICH CINEMATIC HERITAGE IS GIVEN THE SPOTLIGHT AT THE LUANG PRABANG FESTIVAL

WISE KWAI
THE NATION
LUANG PRABANG

CAMBODIA'S CONSTANT struggle to reconcile its bloody Khmer Rouge past with the ancient legacy of Angkor and the push for modernity in the 21st century were common threads running through five movies at the sixth Luang Prabang Film Festival, which made Cambodia the subject of its first "Spotlight" programme.

Curated in part by Sok Visal, Cambodia's "Motion Picture Ambassador" to the Luang Prabang fest, the "Spotlight" devoted a full day to the country's re-emerging cinema movement, with a diverse selection of four films. The line-up included the documentaries "The Cambodian Space Project: Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll" and "Still I Strive", martial-arts action in "Hanuman" and melodrama in "The Last Reel". Shown on another day was a fifth Cambodian entry, the cult crime-comedy "Gems on the Run", co-directed by Visal.

Cambodia's "code of women's conduct", masked killers and arranged marriages were other common themes linking the films.

Referenced in at least three of the entries, that book that holds that Cambodian women should be polite, quiet and dutiful, is promptly tossed out by domineering female protagonists. In "Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll" a Phnom Penh bargirl undergoes a transformation from a mouse-like figure afraid of her own voice to a tigress-like diva rocker who could teach a thing or two to Cookie Lyon of TV's "Empire". In "The Last Reel", a teenage girl jumps off the back of her gangster boyfriend's motorbike to take up the mantle of movie producer and actress as she tries to reconstruct the missing reel of a 1970s historical epic. And in "Gems on the Run", a plucky gun moll chooses love, and falls for the movie's unlikely hero, a portly police officer who wants to be a singer.

A masked vigilante is out for revenge in "Hanuman", which brings Cambodia's ancient Bokator "pounding a lion" martial art out of the shadows. And it's masked men who rob an armoured car in "Gems on the Run". Meanwhile, both the heroine in "The Last Reel" and the plus-sized leading man of "Gems on the Run" are seeking to escape from pending marriages arranged by social-climbing parents.

More martial arts are on display in the jawdropping documentary "Still I Strive", which covers the orphan schoolchildren of the National Action Culture Association, an organisation run by veteran actress Peng Phan. Having lost her own family during the Khmer Rouge years, she and her husband devote



Sok Visal, co-director of "Gems on the Run", talks about Cambodian cinema with Mark Eberle, director of "The Cambodian Space Project: Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll" at the Luang Prabang Film Festival.

their lives to teaching arts to the orphans. With individual profiles of students, showing the hardships they faced in broken homes to a life of love and learning at the orphanage, the film follows their efforts to perform for the country's arts-and-culture patron, Princess Bopha Devi. Directed by Adam Pflieger and A Todd Smith, "Still I Strive" has these remarkable youngsters acting in full-fledged dramatic segments, following a parallel quest in ancient times,

in which their skills in music, dance, storytelling and stage combat are used to full effect.

The gritty "Hanuman", meanwhile, is set in contemporary Phnom Penh, where a masked vigilante rises up to challenge the country's culture of impunity and take revenge on criminals who killed his father. The masked man is also reunited with his estranged brother, a police officer who has been secretly trying to bring his father's killers to justice himself.



Still I Strive



The Cambodian Space Project: Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll

Directed by Italian filmmaker Jimmy Henderson, "Hanuman" is clearly inspired by "The Raid", which vividly brought Indonesia's *pencaik silat* martial arts to world screens. Along with nods to Thailand's Tony Jaa and "Ong-Bak", "Hanuman" also revels in the lurid images of Italy's spaghetti westerns and giallo slashers.

"The Cambodian Space Project" and "The Last Reel" both dealt with the vibrant Cambodian pop culture of the 1970s. Under the patronage of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, himself a musician, producer, director and star of his own movies, Cambodia's cinematic golden age was paralleled by a rollicking music scene, which emulated American rock 'n' roll. Both scenes were brought to an abrupt end in 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took over, emptied the cities and put the populace to work making the country into an agrarian utopia. Intellectuals and artists didn't fit into that scheme, and were targets for persecution and death.

The forces of music and film combined in "The Cambodian Space Project: Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll", which surveys the resurgence of Cambodian rock and its revival under an unusual band, the Cambodian Space Project, which began in 2009 when Australian pop-artist and musician Julien Poulson heard the extraordinary voice of bar girl Srey Thy performing karaoke. The two had little in common but music, but it was enough. The band is similar to another outfit, the US-based Dengue Fever, which was featured on the soundtrack to Matt Dillon's 2002 made-in-Cambodia drama "City of Ghosts" and have been the subject of their own documentary. But while that band's frontwoman Chhom Nimol was influenced by the slain 1970s Cambodian singer Ros

Sereysothea, the Cambodian Space Project's Thy has taken the more earthy and grounded vocalists Pan Ron has her major influence.

Directed by German Mark Eberle, "Not Easy Rock 'n' Roll" follows the band's journey from the bars to Phnom Penh to music clubs in Sydney, Paris and Hong Kong. Clips include the band's landmark performance at the Cambodia International Film Festival, providing live musical accompaniment to Georges Melies' 1902 science-fiction epic "A Trip to the Moon", the style of which was emulated by Cambodian filmmakers in the 1970s and by Eberle in fantastic animation sequences that imagined the photogenic Thy as an actress in an Angkorian sci-fi epic.

The film was a hit with Luang Prabang viewers, who gave it the festival's first Audience Award.

Cambodia's cinematic golden age, previously covered in French-Cambodian director Chou Davy's "Golden Slumbers", unspools further in "The Last Reel", a handsomely mounted drama that is the country's official submission to next year's Academy Awards. Directed by Kulikar Sotho, who rose to prominence as a location supervisor on Angelina Jolie's made-in-Cambodia action romp "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider", "The Last Reel" follows a young woman who discovers old film reels in a dilapidated Phnom Penh movie palace and realises that the beautiful actress in the movie is her mother. Secrets of the family's Khmer Rouge past surface as the young women sets out to recreate the movie's missing final reel, with help from a motley crew of her biker boyfriend and the elderly projectionist.

She is played by young actress Ma Rynet, who also appears in "Hanuman". And the girl's mother (or should it be her grandmother?) is portrayed by Dy Saveth, one of the survivors of the Golden Age. Saveth also appears in "Cambodian Space Project", imparting advice to the budding diva Thy.

Further talent ties are cemented by the appearance of hard-working actor Rous Mony, who plays the sneering villain in "Hanuman", "The Last Reel" and "Gems". He's also likely lurking the background in "Space Project" and "Still I Strive".