

Luang Prabang Festival Founder on Building the “Sundance of Asia” (Q&A)



The opening outdoor screening of the Luang Prabang Film Festival attracted a crowd of 1,500
Courtesy Luang Prabang Film Festival - H 2014

by Patrick Brzeski 12/11/2014

Gabriel Kuperman speaks to THR about launching a film fest on the banks of the Mekong, bringing cinema to Laos and why the exotic locale is the perfect place for a major industry gathering

It's hard to imagine a more improbable locale for an international film festival than Luang Prabang, Laos. The sleepy, historic city has no working cinemas and Laos—one of the world's poorest nations—produces just three to five movies each year.

A beloved gem on the Southeast Asian travel circuit and UNESCO world heritage town, Luang Prabang is nestled on the banks of the Mekong river and typically attracts visitors interested in all things ancient—bustling night markets, orange-robed monks and resplendent Buddhist temples—rather than contemporary screen culture. And yet, the Luang Prabang Film Festival, which wrapped up its fifth edition this week, is on the rise, having transformed its liabilities and eccentricities into compelling selling points.

The festival's opening film, local rom-com omnibus *Laos in Love*, was held Dec. 6 in an open-air plaza adjacent to the city's famed night bazaar, attracting a record 1,500 viewers—a lively mix of Lao families, visiting cineastes and curious tourists.

Founded in 2010 by American **Gabriel Kuperman**, the festival began with just a handful of screenings held at one outdoor venue. This year, it played nearly 30 movies from Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia, including Thai blockbuster *Pee Mak Phrakanong* and Cambodian auteur **Rithy Panh's** 2013 Oscar nominee, *The Missing Picture*. The event remains non-profit, relying on the largesse of regional film companies and governmental organizations. Despite the challenges of

fundraising in Laos, the festival expanded this year to multiple venues and featured short film programs, panel discussions, live performances, Q&As with guest directors and a photography exhibition about the disappearance of Southeast Asia's classic movie houses.

“Our ultimate vision is to make the festival into something like Asia's version of Sundance,” said LPFF board member **Bree Fitzgerald**. “This is such a beautiful place to visit and the city is well stocked with amazing boutique hotels. If we keep our programming strong, I'm confident we'll continue to grow.”

Not long after a sunset cruise on the Mekong, a new addition to the festival for visiting filmmakers and guests, THR spoke with Kuperman about LPFF's unique atmosphere and what it's like building a world-class film event in one of Asia's most exotic locations.

How did you end up founding a film festival in northern Laos?

I was born and raised in Washington, DC, but spent around six years in New York City before moving to Laos. There, I received my formal education in film and media, while also working in the same field for companies like Viacom, Clear Channel, and smaller production houses. When I decided to move to Laos in 2008, I wanted to start a project that used my experience, and as cliché as it sounds, make a difference here. It was clear that there was not much of a “film culture” in Laos at the time. Only one or two films were being made per year, and there was only one working cinema in the entire country. This latter fact is still the case, though Platinum Cineplex is opening a theater in mid-2015. The former has changed greatly, as now, about four or five films are being produced each year, a huge increase since our founding. It was also clear there was not a single major festival in the region that just focused on Southeast

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Asian cinema. So, we created a space for these regional artists to get together and share their experiences, learn from each other, and pool resources for promotion of Southeast Asian cinema to other parts of the world, while also showing Lao filmmakers that it is possible for them to have a robust film industry, on par with those in neighboring countries.

What made you think a festival could thrive here?

Most significant film festivals are destination events, so Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a very touristed one at that, is a perfect place for that. One of the advantages of the town is that it's so small. You can really feel the energy of the festival everywhere while you are here, and it's very easy to get between our screening venues, which are all in walking distance of each other.

I was struck by how many kids and families came out for the opening film—and how excited they seemed to be about seeing a movie on a big screen in their own language. How do you balance the interests of the local and international audiences?

I do believe Lao people need to be able to see Lao films, to know that the industry is developing, and that content is being created for them. Lao have been far too reliant on Thai media for many years, and I am glad to see these sectors developing rapidly in the country.

Our open-air night venue is more geared to a local audience. Most of the films we show there are Lao and Thai, so they are more accessible to Lao people. Generally, they are more commercial films. The films we show in our indoor day venue are more edgy or may require a greater understanding of film as an art form or means of expression.

What's your vision for the festival's development over the next few years?

We want it to continue being a festival with in the same spirit—local, casual, accessible, collaborative—while growing and being able to have an impact on more people. We want to have more master classes, more discussions, more workshops. We want the world to know that the Luang Prabang Film Festival is the place to go to see the best and most important films from Southeast Asia. I think we are already on that road, but it's exciting to go down it further.

What role do you see the festival playing in the nascent Lao film industry?

One of the festival's activities about which I am most pleased is the Lao Filmmakers' Fund. In this, the fund's second year, we were able to raise a whopping \$15,000 for use by local artists, the bulk of which came from a hugely generous donation from Coca-Cola (many films in Laos are made for as little as \$5,000). In addition to forging bonds between the regional film industries, we try each year to have a bigger and bigger impact on the development of the Lao film industry; with the disbursal of grants from the fund, we are quite literally making production possible. I see this as one of the greatest tangible successes of our still-growing project.