

Finding a cinematic VOICE

THE LUANG PRABANG FILM FESTIVAL ASPIRES TO BE "THE SUNDANCE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA"

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THE NATION
LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

THE FIFTH edition of the Luang Prabang Film Festival hadn't officially opened yet and its founder and director Gabriel Kuperman was speechless. No, really. He'd lost his voice.

"Curtis, there's a..." he raspyly tells an out-of-town journalist before being told to shush and save his voice for his remarks later in the evening, when he'd join Lao dignitaries onstage to bang a gong to signal the start of the festival.

"How can it be that we are already in our fifth year? It feels like only a few months ago we were just figuring out how a major film event could be realised in a country that had never seen anything like it before," the hoarse-voiced Kuperman told the crowd assembled to watch the world premiere of the opening film, "Vientiane in Love", which featured five stories by four directors from Laos' newly emergent movie industry.

Since the festival started in 2011 as a showcase of Southeast Asian cinema, Kuperman has been joined by a board of directors. Among the members is producer Nicholas Simon, whose Indochina Productions has specialised in supporting services for such films as "Transformers: Dark of the Moon" in Cambodia and the upcoming "Avengers: Age of Ultron" in Bangladesh.

"The festival is growing. We're seeing more Lao people attending, and for our opening night it's estimated we had an audience of 1,500," Simon says. His ultimate goal would be for the Luang Prabang Film Festival to be "the Sundance of Southeast Asia", referring to Robert Redford's tiny indie-film fest. That one, in a small Utah town, has grown over the past three decades to become a mecca for Hollywood bigwigs in search of their next Oscar winner.

That the Luang Prabang festival has continued is a constant source of amazement for the organisers, especially given the fact that the city has no working cinemas. The notion of seeing a movie is still usually associated with popping in the latest DVD from a pirate vendor and watching it on a small screen at home.

Boosting the cinema culture is one of the festival's aims, says another board member, Bree Fitzgerald, a Toronto filmmaker and programmer based in Vientiane.

"Aside from the theatre in Vientiane, there aren't really any cinemas in this country," Fitzgerald says. "The film culture needs to be brought up. By exposing folks to what the rest of Southeast Asia and beyond are doing, that'll filter in."

Organisers also want to support the nascent Lao movie industry, and for that they're looking to the early versions of Sundance, before that festival became so big. "We don't want to get big - it wouldn't fit this environ-



The main venue at the Handicraft Market has "Vientiane in Love" on opening night.



The closing film, "The Missing Picture".



A scene from the opening film, "Vientiane in Love".

ment," Fitzgerald says. "Our model is Sundance in the beginning, when it was all about master classes and workshops and making it for the filmmakers themselves. Luang Prabang is perfect for that. It's the place you want to go if you need a creative jump-start to finish your film."

This year, for the second edition of the Lao Filmmakers Fund, the festival awarded a total of \$15,000 in grants to two Lao directors, with support from Coca-Cola, the Motion Picture Association and Lao Ford. They are Xaisongkham Induangchanthy, who will complete his drama "Those Below" about the legacy of unexploded bombs left by America's "Secret War" against Laos, and Vilayphong Phongsavanh, who is using a flying drone-camera to make a short documentary on the trendy new sport of freerunning.

The fest's main venue is the

Handicraft Market, which is the centre of the city's Unesco World Heritage district, home to the lucrative tourist trade that attracts around 500,000 visitors a year. The big screen is erected in the outdoor plaza that is filled with blue plastic chairs that have become the festival's icon. Each night, foreigners and locals mingle as the movies are beamed from a digital projector. Some folks drift in and out, pausing to take in a scene or two before continuing on down the street to browse for souvenirs at the night market or grab a cold beer.

On Sunday, the plaza was bursting at the seams for the Thai blockbuster horror-comedy "Pee Mak Phrakanong", one of seven Thai movies in the fest. That was followed by "We Are Moluccans", an Indonesian drama in which a motorbike-taxi driver starts a youth foot-



The daytime venue, in an old wooden building on the grounds of the Hotel de la Paix.



The outdoor venue was packed for the Thai film "Pee Mak Phrakanong".



The tuk-tuk shuttle runs fans between the two venues.

ball league to save the children in a community torn apart by sectarian violence.

Other outdoor highlights include the rousing Thai documentary "The Songs of Rice", which screened last night with producer Pimpaka Towira in attendance. Don't worry, Thai moviegoers, Pimpaka says - it's coming soon to cinemas near you. There's also this year's biggest Thai blockbuster, the Oscar-hopeful "The Teacher's Diary", the Lao drama "Tuk Tuk", the Thai-Lao co-production "My Teacher", and, remarkably, the Academy Award-nominated documentary "The Missing Picture", in which Cambodian director Rithy Panh uses clay figures to reconstruct his painful memories of the Khmer Rouge era.

By day, the festival is a smaller affair, but that component is growing. This year the fest moved to a new day-

time venue, the Hotel de la Paix, a French-colonial edifice that used to be a prison. Transformed into a five-star resort, albeit one with very high walls, the Hotel de la Paix hosts the festival in an old-fashioned wooden house on stilts. The rustic setting has room for 50 viewers, more than double the capacity of the daytime venue of past years. A tuk-tuk shuttle provides transport from the Handicraft Market to the hotel, but it isn't all that far away.

Attracting mostly foreign tourists and local expat characters, the daytime screenings offer movies that are deemed too risky to show outside, such as Indonesia's "The Jungle School", about a schoolteacher who rebels against her NGO to trek deep into the forest to teach a remote tribe how to read. Others include "Madam Phung's Last Journey", about a Vietnamese carnival troupe of ageing



drag queens, and "The Patriarch", a dark Filipino crime drama about a fisherman who, much like Walter White in the TV series "Breaking Bad", turns to dealing drugs and ultimately betrays his family.

There's gentler fare too, such as the contemplative elder-care romance "Sayang Disayang". Director Sanif Olek was on hand to talk excitedly about his slow-moving drama, which chronicles the relationship between an elderly, upper-class Singaporean Muslim and his Indonesian cook and housekeeper. The first Malay-language film from Singapore in 50 years, it's the city-state's Oscar pick.

That was followed by Canadian Daniel Ziv's musical documentary "Jalan" from Indonesia. The noon-time screening filled the house to capacity, prompting festival organisers to start thinking about an even bigger venue for the coming years.

Accommodations for the writer were provided by the Luang Prabang Film Festival and Villa Malý

THE REST OF THE FEST

■ The Luang Prabang Film Festival wraps up tomorrow. For more details, see www.LPFilmFest.org.

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