

## ARTS

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# STRANGE CREATURES COME TO LIFE

Chiang Mai thrills to the best of Southeast Asian puppetry

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If the Asean Enchanting Puppets Festival, staged in Chiang Mai last weekend by the Tourism Authority and Chiang Mai University, made for a dazzling display of puppet virtuosity, there were two festival events in particular that went far beyond mere entertainment, providing refreshment for the soul.

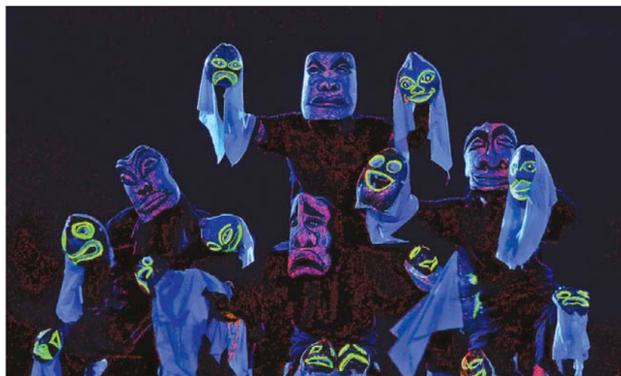
The Issan-based Dek Thevada Troupe astonished the most. Only schoolchildren, their performance conveyed breathtaking professionalism, great wit and spiritual enlightenment.

The troupe's puppets were made of sticky-rice containers and other everyday objects, but they made so much out of so little. The rough-hewn puppets came to life with a multitude of colours to tell a story that gripped adults and children alike.

Director Preecha Karun sees puppetry as a way of giving people a voice. Believing as a Buddhist that enlightenment is accessible to all, he has worked with children who committed crimes. Locked up in institutions, they were too scared to speak for themselves, but could express themselves through puppets.

The Dek Thevada youngsters are in no trouble at all, but still learn from Preecha that they have a duty to strive for enlightenment, and can do so by combining fun with morality in creative art.

On Saturday night Dek Thevada told tale of "Angulimala", about the fellow from Buddhist literature who wore a necklace of the fingers of people he'd murdered. He had slaughtered 999 souls, but the Buddha stopped him from taking a 1,000th victim - his own mother.



THE KRABONG LAOS troupe wore fluorescent-painted coconut masks on their arms, knees and faces.

The puppetry was highly animated to begin with, drawing many laughs, but then tears mixed in as the themes of sin and redemption came forward and we saw the victims in their death throes. Ultimately, of course, joy returned with the recognition that we can always change for the better - and that some of the youngest participants in the festival were capable of such a great performance.

Dek Thevada should be sent round the world as a representative of the spirit and soul of Thailand.

The other outstanding presentation was by the troupe Krabong Laos, whose leader, Leuthmany Insiengmay, proclaimed that his productions follow no rules, setting them apart from traditional puppetry.

Like their neighbours in Isaan, Krabong also uses sticky-rice containers and other cast-off objects, full of character even if not so pretty. Its most fantastical show had coconut masks on the actors' arms, knees and faces, with fluorescent material creating an effect at once

supernatural, terrifying and sublime. If puppetry is all about making dead materials come to life, Krabong goes further, suggesting the nature of eternal realms. Leuthmany's avant-garde remake of puppet art is shocking and brilliant.

The Vietnam National Puppetry Theatre offered more surprises - magical, clever and great fun too. The performers came onstage wearing thatch on their heads and linked arms to become strutting ostriches. The choreography, using conventional but beautiful puppets, was enthralling.

Thai troupe Jona's most effective sketch had a ghostly masked human interacting with a puppet of seemingly inanimate materials. Had the puppet become human or the human puppet?

The delight was in not being able to figure it out.

And the Philippines' Mulat Theatre showed its trademark adrenaline and playfulness in a production by Amelia Lapena Bonifacio about the King of the Monkey's dreadful headache.

Hilarious animals popped up everywhere doing ridiculous things in what was simply the most lovely

entertainment, bringing peals of laughter from the children.

Htwe Oo Myanmar produced exhilarating effects with puppets controlled by a multitude of strings. The audience was unaware of the many complex mechanical actions, but appreciated the fluidity of the characterisations.

There were terrific shadow-puppet shows from Indonesia and Thailand. The Thai one, with scenes from everyday life - such as children using emotional blackmail to extract pocket money from their dad and then vanishing with it - drew knowing laughs.

The festival included demonstrations and seminars, with a particularly good one from the Joe Louis Theatre that showed why three people are needed to control one giant puppet. They did their routine without the puppet and then with it, showing how their profound dancing skills are made a part of the puppet's larger-than-life identity.

Failures of management marred an otherwise remarkable event. The biggest mistake was scheduling the Vietnam National Puppetry Theatre's water-puppet show for a sort of grand finale. The huge tank of water waiting at the side of the main stage forced audience members to switch seats quickly, many ending up with obstructed views.

Because of the crowding and discomfort, the finale - a riotous display of fire- and water-breathing dragons - was kept brief, making it all the more absurd after all the trouble of bringing the puppets to Chiang Mai. They should have had a full-length show and at a better location.

There were also frequent programme changes, leading to missed events and late arrivals - and children enduring a dry lecture instead of enjoying a fun puppet show.

The festival deserves to be an annual event, and with better management, it would be even more adorable next time.

## STAGE REVIEW



NARA CHAN displays a table cloth at her family's silk farm in Kandal province's Prek Bongkong.

## ON ITS LAST THREADS

Cambodia's silk industry is barely hanging on

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In a small room in the Cambodian capital, laboratory technicians wearing latex gloves and flip-flops inspect hundreds of buzzing white silkworm moths before pairing them up to mate.

With its silk industry in rapid decline, Cambodia is pinning its hopes on moth matchmaking and disease control to save its precious silkworms and keep centuries-old traditions alive.

More than 30 years ago, the brutal Khmer Rouge regime all but eliminated silk farming and the sector has been slow to recover, lagging regional rivals that use modern technology to produce better quality silk.

Now the country's silkworms are once again under threat, but from a different kind of enemy.

"Disease is killing more than 50 per cent of the silkworms," says Mey Kalyan, director of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's Cambodian silk programme.

Those that do survive are a third of the size compared to other regional producers.

"In a nutshell, the [silk] farmers have stopped doing it. The weavers have stopped weaving and the plantations have stopped growing mulberries needed to feed silkworms," he adds.

The amount of Cambodian land set aside for mulberry cultivation has plummeted from about 6,000 hectares in the 1940s to just 40 hectares today, Kalyan says.

The Silkworm Egg Production Centre in Phnom Penh is part of a \$475,000 (Bt14.2 million) rehabilitation project launched in September 2009.

Placed over several sheets of newspapers, the silkworm moths are each inspected by technicians who then couple them so that they can reproduce.

After four to six days, the female moths will be placed on a chemically treated sheet and isolated to lay their eggs, which are later sterilised and incubated.

Under the project, seven silk farms have also been opened across the country and training in silk production has been provided for those interested in the industry.

But after three years, funds from the UN to run the egg production centre will run out next

month and no one else seems interested to invest.

There is hope however.

After three years of work, the researchers discovered a high-yield silkworm hybrid that feeds exclusively on cassava, something which is abundant in Cambodia.

The breakthrough provided a rare glimmer of optimism for protecting a tradition which dates back to the 13th century.

The fine texture and quality of Cambodia's "golden silk" has been sewn by local reeler and weavers into some of the finest quality garments in Southeast Asia, but the trade is slowly dwindling into extinction.

Silk yarn production has slowly declined in recent years, from five tonnes in 2009 to about four tonnes a year today.

Locally made yarn has more than doubled in price since 2010 and Cambodia now imports approximately 400 tonnes each year worth a total of nearly \$10 million.

Ven On, a 60-year-old silk weaver in Takeo province's Prey Kabbas district who uses Cambodian

yarn, is only able to make about \$50 a month selling her silk scarves and traditional sarongs, which are too expensive for most buyers.

"I make only a little money and I can't support my family," she says.

Her hand-woven sarongs fetch between \$120 and \$150, depending on the quality, but her profit is only 10 per cent.

The quality of Cambodian-made silk is generally poorer than that of other regional producers due to a traditional manual reeling process that results in fabric that is too coarse for the luxury market.

In more developed silk-producing markets such as China and India, which together produce more than 90 per cent of world supply, reeling machines make the process less time consuming.

"The Cambodian silk industry, especially silk thread production, is having trouble right now," says Madagascar-born clothing designer Eric Raisina, who has shops in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap but uses mostly silk imported from Thailand and China.

"That is a shame for a country that used to have great reputation with its unique yellow cocoon called 'golden silk'," he adds.

## Of brides and flying horses

Marc Chagall's obsession with leitmotifs is obvious in a Paris exhibition

JORG VON UTHMANN  
BLOOMBERG  
Paris

Popularity can be a curse. Once Marc Chagall had made his name as one of the most successful artists of the 20th century, he became sentimental and repetitive.

The art critic Robert Hughes dismissed Chagall's late work as "cloying ethnic kitsch".

A show running through July 21 at the Musee du Luxembourg in Paris is a welcome opportunity to reassess the legitimacy of his fame.

Wisely, the organisers have limited themselves to the period between 1914, when Chagall had found his own style, and the mid-'50s, when his tendency to plagiarise himself got the better of him.

The '60s are represented only by a few studies for "La Vie", the enormous canvas he

Painted for the opening of the Maeght Gallery, his neighbour in St Paul de Vence.

Chagall (1887-1985) was born in Vitebsk in what is now Belarus. At the time, it belonged to the Pale of Settlement, the area in which the Jews of imperial Russia were allowed to live.

Chagall came from a simple, very pious family. Although he soon left the narrow world of his childhood behind, the shtetl and Orthodox Judaism remained the most important source of his inspiration.

From 1910 to 1914, he lived in Paris and had many friends among the avant-garde. Although it's easy to detect Cubist, Expressionist and Surrealist influences in his work, he never belonged to any school.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917, Chagall was among the many Jews who welcomed them as liberators. He gladly accepted the job of

Commissar of Fine Art in the Vitebsk district.

The rivalry with his colleague Kasimir Malevich and the hostility of other faculty members who disliked Chagall's "bourgeois individualism" drove him out of town.

In 1923, we find him again in France where he stayed for the rest of his life, except for the years of the German Occupation which he survived in New York.

The show presents the 100 or so oil paintings, water colours, drawings and etchings in more or less chronological order, grouping them around the two world wars, each of which disrupted Chagall's life.

Although the organisers do their best to vary the subjects, Chagall's obsession with a limited number of leitmotifs is all too obvious.

Brides, rabbis, fiddlers and red animals, preferably flying through the air, pop up again and again.

Perhaps the most surprising among his obsessions is a Christian theme, the Crucifixion. Chagall used it as a symbol for



CHAGALL used Christ's crucifixion as a symbol for Jewish suffering and the destruction of Vitebsk in World War II.

Jewish suffering and the destruction of Vitebsk in World War II.

Several colour lithographs in the show illustrate "The Thousand and One Nights". Although the suggestion originally came from Chagall's French dealer, Ambroise Vollard, the oriental fairy tales and the artist seemed to be made for each other. Chagall himself said: "Remember that

my painting is not really European. It's partly oriental."

Many Parisians haven't forgiven their government for inviting Chagall to repaint the ceiling of the Opera. For the 500,000 tourists who visit the house every year, it's the main attraction.

They should complement their visit with this most enjoyable show.