

**NUMBER TWO OF THREE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES ABOUT ASIAN PUPPET THEATRE:
THAILAND 2005, BURMA 2007, INDIA, THAILAND, CAMBODIA 2010**

by Michael Meschke, Stockholm, Sweden

THE MARIONETTES OF BURMA A THREATENED TRADITION



**A project carried out in 2006-2007 by Michael Meschke
with support from SIDA**

This report is the last part of a venture that has been going on for several years thanks to a grant that has been entrusted to Michael Meschke by SIDA, The Swedish International Development Agency.

The venture has included several major efforts:

1. **Theatre production** in 2004 in Bangkok of *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the epic *Ramayana*: students from three universities (Thammasat, Chulalongkorn, and Silpakorn) studied the play in a unique collaboration, under the direction of Michael Meschke, who has devoted years to the subject.
2. **Donation** to Thammasat University of an international puppet theatre library, in memory of Drama department head Wandee Limpiwatana.
3. **Nang Yai**: the rediscovery in 2005 of a nearly extinct dramatic art form from Thailand that combines dance with shadow play. Support was given to the management and students at Wat Ban Don near Rayong. Air humidifiers were obtained in order to rescue dried, old, leather puppets. A video documentation was realised and a report was distributed to a selection of art schools, puppet theatre institutions and interested individuals in Europe.
4. **The Marionettes of Burma**: Research and mapping of a significantly diminished dramatic art form of international interest as described in the following report.

All in all, these different projects have resulted in a network of fruitful contacts. It has been possible to convey knowledge to parties concerned outside the respective cultures. Locally, artists' belief in their own cultural heritage was strengthened.

This has doubtlessly increased the interest for Nang Yai among the younger generations.

BANDA ACEH, 2006

Unexpectedly, an initiative arose which deviated somewhat from my grant application, but it still seemed to be in accordance with SIDA's overall purpose. One year after the disastrous tsunami of December 26, 2004, I went to the worst hit area – Banda Aceh, in Indonesia.

I brought marionettes with me and wanted to make an effort for traumatized children. Once there, I was able to cooperate with Rädda Barnen (Save the Children) whose staff gratefully received instructions and material for creating puppets with little children. A report and a video-documentation about this were presented to SIDA, Rädda Barnen, and others on March 27, 2006.

Stockholm - April, 2007
Michael Meschke

THE MARIONETTES OF BURMA

INTRODUCTION

Before starting the project, I took advice from several experts such as journalist Bertil Lintner and others, concerning the political situation in Burma at present. The military dictatorship is constantly worsening. The democratically elected Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest has been extended year after year despite massive protests. To approach her or any artist could be risky for those who were already in a difficult situation. It could be dangerous for them to receive financial aid from Westerners. Even just being seen with a Westerner could be reason enough for interrogation. One taxi driver did not dare drive up to a theater that was known to be under surveillance.

But this Burma project, to try to map out and promote the ancient art of marionettes was a matter of heart to me. I had to find a way without contact with the country's authorities and work mostly from outside Burma.

Despite the situation, I managed to realize the overall purpose of the project.

I traveled to Thailand. I am grateful to Dr. Kusama Venzky Stalling in Bangkok (former Head of the Drama Department at Thammasat University), with whom I had collaborated on the *Ramayana*-production in 2004. She had moved on to the cultural institute SPAFA, Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, and introduced me to senior guest researcher Dr. Tin Maung Kyi from Burma, a doctor but also an expert on his country's puppet theater traditions.

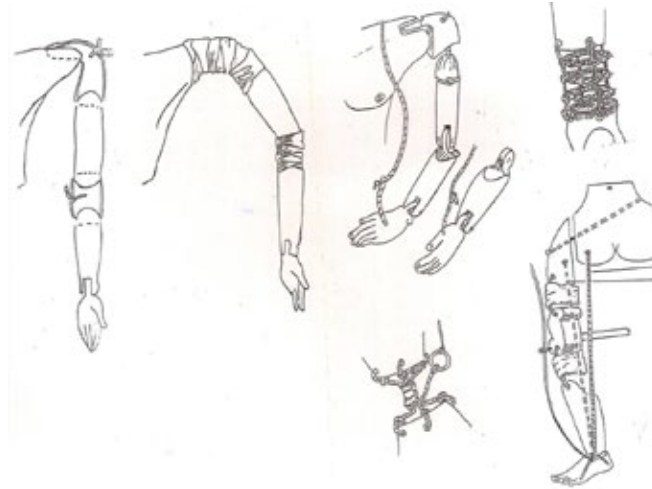
WHY BURMA?

My interest in Burma's relatively forgotten marionettes can be traced back to an early childhood memory, which has been a source of inspiration for my own practice of the puppet theater profession. When I had an ear infection at the age of five, my father showed me an issue of a German magazine called *Atlantis*. In it, I saw the faces of creatures that looked friendlier than anyone I had ever seen. I could not forget their tender smiles. I looked around in the real world and wondered where they could be found. Eventually I realized that these were not humans that I had seen, but marionettes from the distant country of Burma, in Asia.

It gave me no peace. Several decades later, I finally had a chance to travel to the country whose marionettes had fascinated me so much.

CHARACTERISTICS

This personal relationship with Burmese marionettes is thus based on their attractive appearance, i.e. their **aesthetics**, which differs from all other string puppet traditions. I would later learn that they also have objective, constructional, and performance-technical characteristics. Constructional, for example, the body parts are not just connected by links but by ingenious threads and strings.



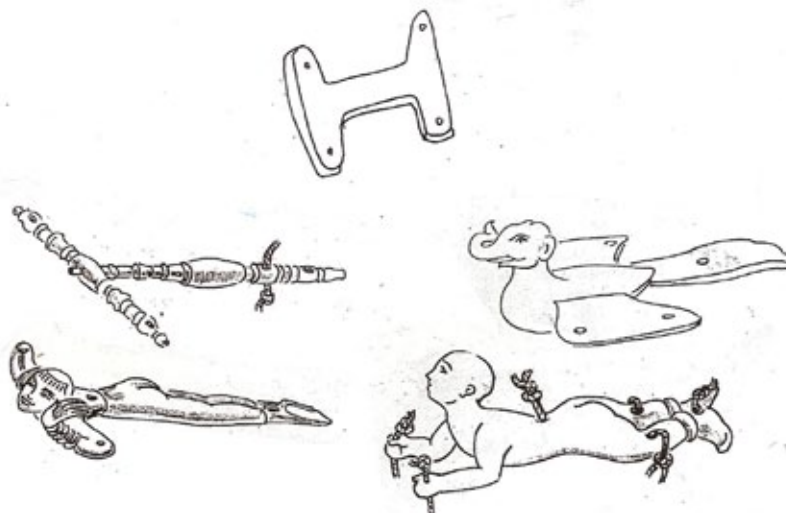
Drawings from the book "Burmese Puppetry", by German author R. H. Bruns, published by White Lotus, Bangkok 2006. There, the interested reader can find further rich and most qualified information.

The legs often have an extra joint in the thigh and arm, in addition to a human's hip, knee, and ankle joints.



Further, not all of the strings are attached to the control – primarily only those connected to the marionettes shoulders (which carry the body weight) and those to the head.

Strings connected to the legs, lower arms, and upper arms – three important functions – lie loose on top of the control. These strings are lifted off, one at a time or together, and are manipulated in the air above or in front of the control. This requires true virtuosity.



Drawings by Tin Maung Kyi

THE FIRST TIME

(Excerpt from a diary from my first visit to Burma in the 1970s)

"Burma (nowadays Myanmar) was ruled by the darkest of dictatorships. First impression: halfway on the road from Rangoon airport (nowadays Yangon) to the city, a gigantic tree grew in the middle of the street. The crown of the tree was covered with dazzling white flowers. As we came closer, my eyes widened. Those were not flowers growing on the tree; they were horses, marionettes painted white, complete with strings and controls. Someone explained the phenomenon: every year in February, the Ne Daw Festival is celebrated, when the spirits, so called 'nats,' celebrate the joy of living. It reminded me of the Dionysus feast of Ancient Greece. One of the nats is called Oo Min Yaw – a wild spirit who likes to get drunk and always rides a white horse. Therefore, the horse is considered a holy creature. So, white horse-marionettes are included in the Burmese puppet theater's permanent gallery of characters. Only once a year it is hung up in trees. I happened to arrive just at the right time!

"Rangoon. Everywhere I turned, I now saw those smiling faces from my childhood. The puppets' faces were mirrors of human faces; the people were, of course, the source of inspiration!

"A puppeteer, whose name I must keep secret out of respect for his safety, showed me Rangoon's largest pagoda: Shwe Dagon. All kinds of knick-knacks were sold on its steps, but also marionettes. While I was examining these, an old woman waved to me. She was standing, discretely hidden, behind a golden dome and had observed my interest in marionettes. She wanted to help me buy some really good ones – from her of course! How should one judge their quality? Well, the eyes should be made of glass, not just be painted, because glass reflects light in such a way that their luster resembles that of the human eye.

"I could not help thinking: but the human eye's ability to reflect light does not guarantee that the expression is tender – there are evil eyes, too. How could a people with such obviously tender expressions, a people that brought forth an art of most sensitive puppet faces, survive under the oppression of a dictatorship? Or were people in fact able to persevere because of that?

"The old woman then encouraged me to feel the marionette under its costume, between its legs. It had sculptured genitals. I was perplexed. Why do so much work when the puppets wear thick and magnificent costumes? The old woman explained: *the marionette is created as a representation of a human. The human is a representation of the Divinity. The Divinity, by definition is perfect, and therefore the marionettes must be so as well!*

The woman's expert knowledge convinced me, and I bought a couple of marionettes from her, among others a naked, discarded boy-marionette, as proof of the woman's statements. Later I heard that there was a new ban against the export of marionettes. After all it felt good that in the middle of oppression, authorities seemed to consider marionettes a part of the national heritage and therefore should not be taken out of the country. How the little boy still ended up at the Marionette Museum in Stockholm need perhaps not be examined too closely."

A few years later I saw a full theatre performance in the city of Pegu. It was in the year of 1982, and I had brought the company of the Stockholm Marionette Theatre on a study tour through Asia. After a long journey by car, through the pitch-black Burmese night, we arrived at the large pagoda outside of Pegu. On the slope, one could discern a sea of silent people sitting on the ground. In the distance, light flickered from a small marionette stage. It caught everyone's attention, unless you were eating or taking a nap on the grass. The graceful marionettes were slowly walking around with dignified steps, their heads tilting and turning elegantly. An exotic orchestra filled the night with suggestive sound. The story that was narrated naturally took place in far-gone times and showed the battle against evil forces, monsters, and wicked rulers. This took place in Burma in 1982.

After the performance, we were allowed to take a look behind the stage. The interest of these rare foreign visitors seemed to frighten the puppeteers. Any dealings with us could be compromising for them.

For me, this first meeting with a marionette performance was a confirmation of my enchantment. When I left the country I thought to myself that a people who is able to keep its genuine traditions alive despite all kinds of distress and oppression will be able to survive any tyranny. May these little freedom fighters of wood and brocade live on in the future through new generations of puppeteers.

THE SITUATION IN 2007

I now had to develop the project from Bangkok and came to SPAFA, an interesting, government-supported organization working to promote awareness of the cultural heritage throughout the region of Southeast Asia. This is where the Burmese Dr. Tin is working as a guest researcher. After his advice, in February, 2007 I made a brief visit to Mandalay, the home of the marionette tradition, and to Yangon. I was able to map out most of the still remaining marionette theaters, as seen in the list below. Also .. Ye Dway was of help. He had acted as an intermediary during my previous trips. The list is probably not complete, but merely an attempt by an outsider to survey the present situation. This may interest specialized Westerners, especially those who hope to prepare a well-developed cultural exchange for the day when the present regime collapses.

1. Mandalay Marionettes Company, leader: Ma Ma Naing
2. Academy Sein Moo Tar, Mandalay
3. Mintha Theatre, leader: Ohn Maung, Mandalay
4. Moustache Brothers, Mandalay
5. Htwe Oo Myanmar, Traditional Puppet Show, Yangon
- 6.



1. Mandalay Marionettes Theatre



2. Academy Sein Moo Tar



4. Moustache Brothers



3. Mintha Theatre



5. Htwe Oo Myanmar and Mr. Dwa

WHAT IS PERFORMED?

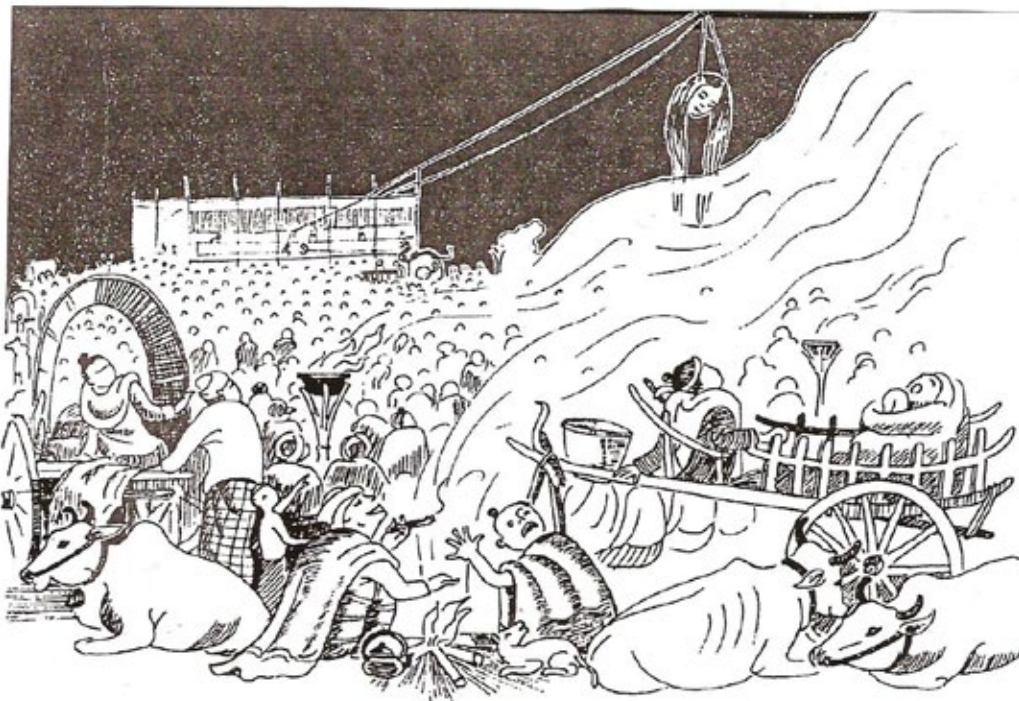
A performance consists of dialog, song and music. The repertoire is fairly similar from one group to the next, simply because the tradition offers a certain choice of topics and a certain gallery, which includes approximately thirty classic characters, one of which is the aforementioned horse. Here are some of the other most significant ones:

The Hermit, The King of the Heavenly Troops, The Good Heavenly Creature, The Evil Heavenly Creature, The Prime Minister, The Prince and Princess, Ladies-in-waiting, clowns, demons, wizards, witches, and animals such as The Magic Snake, The Monkey, The Tiger, The Elephant. (The animals have the distinction of being reincarnations of Buddha!)

The topics are derived from stories of Buddha's life (so called Jatakas), from mythology, and from Burma's history. Adaptations of modern drama can also be seen.

To perform some of these amazing numbers requires sensitivity to both drama and dance, as well as certain technical challenges. Here is a description made by Dr. Tin of a peculiar event in the classic marionette performance:

"The witch was believed by the Burmese to be a lady secretly trained in the art of black magic. The witch in puppet plays was always displayed as a flying head with long hanging hair. One night in the 1950s, I still remember a puppet play at a place now occupied by a police station in Mandalay. In the story performed, the witch's head was seen flying over the audience to a rapid tempo played by drum-circle. The head was hung by a rope tied to the top of a bamboo pole about twelve cubits high. The rope ran from the pole to the stage. While the head was rotating, a firework in her mouth was making a good effect on the spectators; their eyes were attracted towards the moving head, showing their interest in the act."



Sketch by Tin Maung Kyi

THEN AND NOW

The original place for marionette theatre was by the pagodas, the Burmese name for Buddhist temples. This confirms its religious origin, which can be found in every puppet theatre tradition around the world. In former times, marionette performances were naturally part of the pagoda festivals, which were popular meeting-points. The performances were free for everyone and lasted all night long. The puppeteers were paid by the Pagoda community.

Marionette theatre also stood high in the Royal Court's estimation. In the middle of the 18th century, the country's Minister of Drama established a set of rules and regulations for how the performances should be carried out. The stories were so familiar to the viewers that their attention was focused on how well the puppeteers manipulated their puppets.

Today, the situation has changed: From a culture-historical perspective, it has become worse. The performance in Pegu, in 1982, was an epic drama that captivated the audience for hours. But these days, marionette theatres rarely get engagements at the pagoda festivals. This is a major reason why theatre groups have been heavily reduced. Theatre leader Ma Ma Naing from Mandalay explained that her theatre gets engagements no more than once a year at a pagoda festival. This can only be improved if the government orders it, she added! In today's Burma, it is difficult for most people to make a living, and it is even more difficult for a small number of performers to make a living from marionette theatre. They have to split themselves between different jobs. It is impossible to determine how they can support themselves thanks to, or despite, the regime.

TOURISM

Today, for obvious reasons, many people have their hopes set on the support from the rather pitiful tourist industry – a double-edged sword, as others recommend a boycott on tourism. There are reliable voices saying that a boycott on tourism is *not* a good method to promote a democratic development. I can't help but compare this to Mikis Theodorakis's message to the world when he had been set free from the Greek dictatorship of 1967-1974: he said that people should visit the country, bear witness to, and expose the dictatorship.

"As long as there are tourists, the marionette theatre can survive", say representatives of marionette theatres in Mandalay. Only tourists can pay, the few Burmese who come may see it for free."

Yangon's only marionette theatre is located anonymously way up in an office building in the middle of the city. It is newly opened and beautifully furnished, waiting for tourists to find their way there. Audiences are recruited by travel agencies, which organize strictly followed programs for a small number of tourist groups. They are a rather pathetic sight – unprepared tourists that look lost and don't seem to know what they, willing or not, are about to see or why.

Adjusting cultural expression to the terms of the tourist industry is a humiliating form to keep a great national tradition alive, because this often requires artistic compromises. But even I have to admit that relying on tourism is probably the only way left to preserve the tradition and *maybe* even regenerate it. This phenomenon is not limited to Burma, but exists throughout all the so-called developing countries. However, a prerequisite of development is that the artists do not begin playing to the gallery, with crowd-pleasing effects, but manage to maintain the original nobility of the art. Some know. Upon having tactful conversations here and there, it became clear that there is a strong awareness of the situation. Rebukes from the West proved unnecessary.

What do the regenerating adjustments involve?

Adjusting to tourism involves not only reducing the duration of performances, but restructuring the content and forms of expression. All the groups have a mixed program, no more than an hour long, where marionette play is combined with performances by live dancers and clowns. The numbers where dancers and marionettes playfully imitate each other are very popular. In the West we do similar border-crossings between disciplines – mixing art forms.



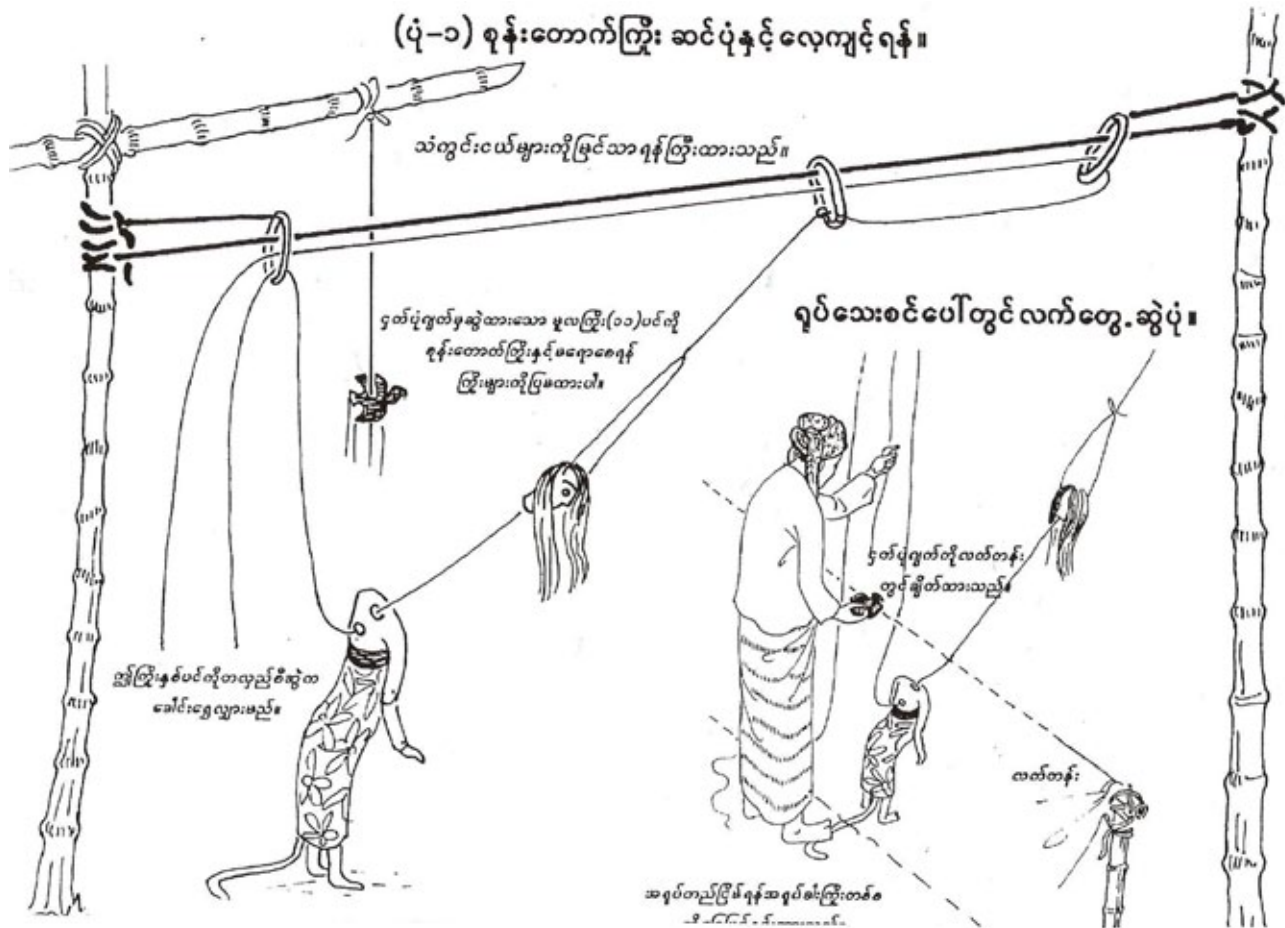
Two clowns: one a human actor, one a marionette

Different theatres specialize in certain recurrent numbers, adjusted to the skilfulness of the individual puppeteers. The Htwe Oo Myanmar Theatre in Yangon showed, for example, two clowns jumping rope who, at the finale, could lift a large ring into the air and jump through it. In Mandalay, at the Academy Sein Moo Tar Theatre, a virtuoso artist, fully visible to the audience, manipulated a marionette which then manipulated yet another, smaller marionette. This classic number is considered to be so difficult that those who master it fight over the sole right to it!



A virtuous puppeteer at the Sein Moo Tar theatre, Mandalay

Mr. Tin Maung Kyi described the equilibristic number of a head flying over the audience.



In these cross-over forms, one can sense a viable regeneration: instead of endless epic stories that are difficult for an unprepared tourist to understand, the different genres are now combined by means of short episodes – many of them comical numbers. It is visually accessible, impressive, and appealing to all ages in both Burma and the Western countries.

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

In Burma, just like everywhere else, development depends on two things: a *tradition* to build on and the *professional training* of new generations.

When it comes to *tradition*, this study has shown that Burmese traditions are both among the world's richest and that they are still living, i.e. they are practiced by skilful masters who draw knowledge from the depths of their people's resources. Puppet theatre practitioners from the West have a lot of inspiration to gain here, and a lot to learn.

When it comes to *training*, the situation is more difficult. In the old days, young people received their training through practical experience with a master; this method has almost ceased to exist. A few years ago, three masters in Mandalay joined forces to offer free courses, but they were cancelled due to a lack of pupils.



Mr. U Than Aung (left) and Ms Mya Nanda with their students, Mandalay

At the Mintha Theatre in Mandalay, I received information which somewhat altered my perception of the regime's educational system. A female dancer performed there, Mya Nanda, but at daytime she was a teacher of marionette manipulation at the University of Culture (a university focused entirely on cultural subjects), which is located far out in the countryside. Thirty students were said to be studying there, training in manipulation techniques for ninety minutes per day for three years. To supplement this training, they also studied dance and music. I traveled there to have a look, but I was not allowed to enter. Foreign visitors must have a special permit, which I did not want to apply for.

In Yangon, the Ministry of Culture, Department of Dance and Drama, was said to run a three-year course from which fifteen students, mostly female, and three teachers graduate every year. It was impossible to verify such impressive information, but it is evident that very few players can find work.

RESISTANCE

In order for the Burmese marionette theatre art form to develop, it is necessary to resist the threats against its existence - threats of more than one sort, both now and henceforth. Today's practitioners try to survive as best they can, skillfully maneuvering, performing allegorical stories about the struggle between good and evil, or with extremely bold, open satire, like that of the famous Moustache Brothers. These are three artists who, together with their wives, present the cheering audience with a combination of shameless monologues, comical clown numbers, dance, and puppet play. Two of the brothers have served long sentences in prison for their outspokenness and for performing for Aung San Suu Kui. Her portrait hangs on the walls of the approximately 4000 square foot theatre venue that only has a few stools for its audience. On the street outside, an undercover policeman prowls about to register whatever they register. At the moment, the interest of foreign audiences and international attention protect the artists and allow them to keep going. The resistance becomes a point of honor and a space to breathe.



In the long run, there is a potentially greater threat than the current political issues: the apparently irresistible fact that audiences prefer other things – television, games, the mass culture of films etc. People just do not want to pay for a marionette show. In the wake of modernization, real or false, comes the illusion that happiness can be found by imitating Western culture. A very real threat can therefore be found in the competition from American subcultures that pours into a country no matter what type of regime it has.

What can be done from abroad?

One recommendation is to work against the isolation of the artists, show them that the world values their traditions. Give recognition and awards to marionette players, or make it possible for more ensembles to travel and present their art – without letting this become, or seem like, a cultural exchange with the regime. On one hand, to obtain passports in order to travel abroad, the authorities control where you travel and why, which the regime could take advantage of. On the other hand, the artists' success abroad could increase the prestige of their art and thereby to some extent help to keep them protected in their own country.

CONCLUSIONS

What other perspectives are there for the survival and development of Burmese marionette theatre? And in what way, if any, is it possible to be of assistance from abroad in the present situation?

Considering the limited conditions of my attempt to make a contribution, it would be presumptuous to draw any definite conclusions. This research has resulted in fresh information that can now be passed on outside of Burma. Indirectly and on a long-term basis, this could benefit development within the country.

The truly difficult challenge is to promote work opportunities for forgotten artists on a local level by an international cultural exchange without cooperating with or promoting the regime. A first step is to maintain contact with the individual artists. Another step is to inform colleagues and interested parties in the West about the situation.

One result of my long-standing interest in Asian traditions with Thailand as a platform for contacts and knowledge is an invitation to teach theatre direction as a guest professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok in the fall semester of 2007.

Swedish stage designer and my colleague at the Marionette Museum, Elisabeth Beijer, has also been invited to teach stage design.



*Two puppeteers, vintage 9031
U Pan Aye, Mandalay
and Michael Meschke, Stockholm*

Stockholm – April, 2007

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Layout

Company addresses:

Mandalay Marionettes Co. 66 Str Bet 26th & 27th Str Mandala www.mandalaymarionettes.com

Mintha Theatre, 27 Str. Bet 65th & 66th Str, Mandalay www.mintha.theatre.com

Academy Sein Moot Tar, Block 306, 89 Str, Bet 32rd & 33rd Str, Chan Aye Thar Zan Township, Mandalay, www.seinmoottar.com

Moustache Brothers, 39 Str Bet 80th & 81 Str, Mandalay

Htwe Oo Myanmar, 422/426 Strand Road, Level 11, Commercial Centre, Yangon
www.htweoomyanmar.com

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Burmese Puppets and Zaw Gyi (9 pages)

History of Myanmar Puppets (10 pages, illustrations)

Stage and Decoration (8 pages, illustrations)

Ceramic Puppets of Myanmar (6 pages), included in Ceramic Traditions in Myanmar, published by: Semeo Regional Centre for History and Tradition, Yangon, 2003

Village Puppets, obsolete and forgotten, (6 pages, illustrations)

Elisabeth den Otter: Thabin! Burmese puppetry, music, song and dance.

A most informative CD-Rom, Amsterdam 2000.

Contact : puppetry@euronet.nl

Post scriptum

Talking puppets: the below article in Bangkok Post, February 07, speaks for itself!

Post scriptum

Apropå dockteater så talar nedanstående artikel i Bangkok Post i februari 2007 för sig själv

BURMA

US accused of plotting to install puppet govt

Rangoon— Military-run Burma yesterday accused the United States of plotting to install a puppet government in the country, after US President George W. Bush vowed to keep pressing it for reform.

The *New Light of Burma* newspaper, a government mouthpiece, accused the United States of pressing for a UN Security Council resolution against the country as a way of installing a new government.

China and Russia vetoed the resolution, but Mr Bush said in his State of the Union address on Tuesday that Washington "will continue to speak out for the cause of freedom" in Burma.

"In pursuing the scheme, the US in 2006 put pressure on the United Nations Security Council to intervene in Burma issues, while destabilising tranquillity and peace and stirring up mass protests and destructive acts in synchronisation in Burma," the *New Light of Burma* newspaper said.

"The most powerful neocolonialist country, for self-interest, is now organising and encouraging its cohorts and lackey groups and resorting to all possible means to install a puppet government in Burma that will dance to its tune,"