

LUANG PRABANG FILM FEST MOVES FORWARD

Annual event eyes larger role in fostering cinema throughout the region

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There was the crowd, the spontaneous chaos, and the outdoor screening that has become a hallmark of the Luang Prabang Film Festival. Its eighth edition ending last night, the film festival in a town without cinemas has grown into an annual highlight every December, with its eyes firmly fixed on Southeast Asian titles and an attempt to expand its role and relevance to regional audience and filmmakers.

At the opening night last Friday, the outdoor screen at Luang Prabang's Handicraft Market, the central square where locals, vendors, backpackers and tourists converge in a carnivalesque hubbub, beamed the opening film, a Lao romantic comedy called *The Anniversary*, and the 1,500 plastic chairs put out for spectators were all taken. It's not a perfect condition for projecting a movie — at the back, noise from children, hawkers and beer-swilling diners sometimes competed with the sound on screen, the subtitles could feel too small, and lights from nearby shops and stalls vied with the beamed-up image. But perhaps it's the raw energy of the setting that counted, and the viewers laughed and reacted to every joke on the screen. It was also possible that since Luang Prabang has no cinemas (though Laos has multiplexes in Vientiane and Pakse), the outdoor screening offered a chance for viewers to experience cinema as a collective activity — and perhaps introduce the notion of “a movie screen” to children who only know television.

Besides a selection of titles from Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Laos, this year the festival highlighted films from its closest neighbour in the “Spotlight On Thai Cinema” programme. Twelve Thai films were screened, from the popular *Chalat Games Geong* (*Bad Genius*) to the restored classic *Santi Vina* and a semi-experimental documentary *Mon Rot Fai* (*Railway Sleepers*). On opening night, Thai film *Hak Man* (*In My Hometown*), which uses the Isan dialect and is set entirely in the Northeast, was shown after the opening Lao film. Another hit at the outdoor screen was the period action film *Thongdee Fankhao* (*Legend Of The Broken Sword*), which stars boxer Buakhao Banchamek as a ruthless warrior of ancient times.

When the LPFF started in 2010, there was only the outdoor screen. Two years later, the festival added screenings at its day venue — basically by showing films on television in a hotel's conference room, a



setting that didn't impress many visiting filmmakers. In the past few years however, the day venue has been moved to the Hotel Sofitel, and the films are now shown inside a handsome timber pavilion set next to an attractive lawn. The 75-seat room is dark and comfortable but not soundproof, so sometimes noise from outside (or when a plane flies overhead) interfered with the screening. Again, it's not ideal, something veteran film festival travellers might frown upon. But it is an improvement. Like most festivals in the world, LPFF is, hopefully, in the perpetual stage of growing and fine-tuning.

These two venues — the outdoor screen at night and the day venue at a 5-star hotel — attracted two totally different crowds and represented two personalities of the event. The night-time showings were mainly attended by locals, and the selection of films geared more towards the popular (except the showing of *Railway Sleepers*, a near-abstract, non-narrative film that observes train passengers in Thailand).

The daytime screenings, on the contrary, showed more challenging films — such as *Dao Khanong* (*By The Time It Gets Dark*) and *Rak Ti Khon Kaen* (*Cemetery Of Splendour*) from Thailand, as well as a documentary *In Exile* from Myanmar and

many others, and the audience was almost exclusively Western expats, festival guests and tourists. The atmosphere, naturally, was more formal, and one wonders if a Lao local would feel somewhat intimidated to venture into the luxurious property to watch a movie.

The LPFF has committed to the development of Lao filmmakers from the start. Once nearly non-existent, Lao filmmakers have become more active in the past decade, and LPFF has emerged as a platform for local talents (four Lao feature films were screened this year, and a number of short films from the Vientiane Short Film Competition). This year the festival also expanded its regional role further by hosting a Talent Lab, where filmmakers from Southeast Asia were picked to pitch their film projects and compete for a US\$10,000 (325,888) investment. A project called *Cat Island* from Filipino filmmaker Siege Ledesma won top prize, while a Lao script called *Raising A Beast* by Xaisongkham Induangchanty was selected as a promising project to join Tribeca Film Institute's pitching and mentoring session in New York next year.

In all, from its origin eight years ago the LPFF has now grown into a bigger, more confident film event, a cultural attraction in a World Heritage town on the bend of the Mekong. With local businesses giving support, the festival is likely to grow even further, and hopefully the fine-tuning of its role and relevance will continue.

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