

Burmese Puppets

The Small Dolls of Burma

Jonathan Copeland

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For



U Khin Maung Htwe

and

Hwte Oo Myanmar Puppet Theatre



PREFACE

I first went to Rangoon in 1981. In those days you only saw what the Government run tours wanted you to see and, although I saw a lot, I didn't see the puppets. Probably there weren't any commercial performances then anyway as there were so few tourists—according to *The Statesman's Year Book 1985-86*, edited by J. Paxton, only 28,230 tourists in 1981—and the longest you could stay was seven days.

My next visit was in 1997 and I was lucky to see a combined dance and puppet performance in Mandalay by the Moustache Brothers, staged just for me and Murni, my partner. That was a great privilege. The group comprised Par Par Lay and Lu Maw, two real life brothers, and Lu Zaw, their cousin.

We didn't know it at the time but Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw had been arrested the year before and sentenced to seven years in a labour camp for a joke criticizing the Government in a performance in Rangoon outside the home of Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996.

Lu Maw, the sole English-speaking brother of the troupe, and his wife, who danced, kept up the shows by themselves. Amnesty International led a campaign for the others' release.

After six years they were allowed out under house arrest and permitted to perform only for foreigners, which they did in the empty shop space on the ground floor of their home, and that's where we saw them.

When I returned at the beginning of the new millennium Htwe Oo had opened in Rangoon, now called Yangon, and were giving magnificent Burmese puppet performances in the cosy living room of the director, U Khin Maung Htwe, in Ahlone Township. The photographs in this book were all taken during one of those wonderful evenings and I would like to thank U Khin Maung Htwe for his help in identifying the puppets.

The photographs (and more) are all available on my photography web site: www.jonathaninbali.com

I would encourage you to go to a performance. You will not regret it.

Jonathan Copeland
Rye, East Sussex
jonathan@murnis.com

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Preface

The History

The Purpose

Patronage

The Performers and Decline

Tourism

The Puppets

The Strings

The Characters

The Mythical Figures

The Humans

The Animals

The Performance

The Stage

The Audience

About the Author and Photographer

A Small Bibliography

Index

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The History

Burmese puppet shows (*Yoke Thay or Small Dolls*) were a popular entertainment under the Burmese monarchy and date back possibly to the Bagan kingdom of the 11th century, even before there were human dance performances.



The Monkeys.

Puppet plays have certainly been performed since the early 15th century—the first recorded mention was in 1444 AD when King Narapati commemorated his merit making on the back of a stone slab, namely his gift of puppeteers to perform during festivals at the Htupayone Pagoda in Sagaing in Upper Burma.



The Prince.

They grew rapidly in prestige and popularity in the 17th century and reached a pinnacle during the Konbaung dynasty founded by King Alaungpaya in 1752, the last dynasty to rule Burma. The delicate movements of Burmese puppets may well be the source of classical Burmese dance and in any case profoundly influenced human dancers.

The first European mention is by Major Symes in 1795 when he was invited to a performance on New Year's Day in Bago.



A Villager.