

The Main Feature

Season 35 - Issue 11 (screening 26.2.15)

Australia 2013
 Cert U 96 minutes
 Language: Lao
 UK release date Friday 14th March 2014

Writer/director **Kim Mordaunt**
 Director of photography **Andrew Commis ACS**
 Film editor **Nick Meyers ASE**
 Casting director **Raweeporn ("Non") Jungmeier**
 Original music by **Caitlin Yeo**
 and featuring music by **The Dynamites & James Brown**

Cast:

Sitthiphon Disamoe as Ahlo
 Bunsri Yindi as Taitok

Loungnam Kaosainam as Kia
 Sumrit Warin as Toma

Suthep Po-ngam as Purple
 Alice Keohavong as Mali



This is the first full-length feature by Kim Mordaunt who documented Laos life and its minefields in *Bomb Harvest*. The following comes from various interviews he gave about the film:

“The producer Sylvia Wilczynski and I lived and worked in Hanoi, Vietnam ten years ago, and while we were there, we use to travel to Laos a lot: it was like our breath out. Hanoi can be an intense place.

It’s a very gentle place, a beautiful country, and then we found out it’s the most bombed place on the planet per capita, and we thought: “We’re educated people, we’ve learnt about the Vietnam War, why don’t we know about Laos?” It was bombed, a plane-load of bombs, every eight minutes, for nine years. And that led to the making of the film *Bomb Harvest*, about an atrocity.

Making a feature length documentary in Laos is not something that you do instantly (laughs); it was a long collaboration with their community in Australia.

Trying to get permission to make it in Laos took over a year: you basically had to have clearance from the government, the press department, the district chief, the village chiefs and the police.



We had to literally embed ourselves into the country: we collaborated with people in the Laos community in Sydney as well to make that film. We actually shot part of the film in northern Thailand. All the characters are based on real people we have met while living and working in Laos. Even the character Purple was inspired by an eccentric alcoholic wearing a purple suit, who we met in a very remote village in Laos when making *Bomb Harvest*.

The rocket festival that you see and all of the landscapes were shot in Laos. Some of the more political scenes, and the kids running through jungles, were filmed in Thailand – the reason being that we didn’t want to run the kids through jungles that potentially had bombs in them! And the political reasons being that in Laos there are currently 50+ hydro dams in planning, and some of the material around the dams we were not allowed to shoot in Laos.

In terms of selecting the cast we had a long, long search. It took a very long time to find these kids. Sylvia and I roamed across schools keeping our eyes open. We looked everywhere.

Kia, the little girl (Lounnam Kaosainam), was part of a little drama group on the outskirts of Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and she straight away struck me as having a strong sense of self. I told her the story and her eyes emoted everything. I had never pitched a film to anyone who had laughed, cried, fallen into depression and got back up again, it was all happening with her.

Originally I had written the film for an eleven-year-old, and when I met Lounnam she was only eight, and I realised that in developing countries an eight-year-old is like an eleven-year-old, and an eleven-year-old is like a teenager. She was inhibited by adulthood and I loved that about her.

She was still very pure in her imagination, and she didn't care what the camera was doing. I took quite a documentary approach to casting: I filmed the cast for a long time and watch them interacting in a natural way with friends and family.

What I loved about Lounnam was that she was tough, she didn't care what people thought, she could kick a ball higher than any fella and she could climb a tree higher than any boy. She is who she was basically, which I really loved about her.



She also had this great internal life and you could just see her emotions in her eyes. For me, although the boy is the protagonist, the girl is the soul of the film and I was thrilled when we found her.

Through a casting agent, I heard about this kid called Sitthiphon Disamoe (also called Ki): he had been a street kid for a couple of years. He had a foster mum who had done some extras work, and that was how we were led to him.

Because of his past he had a lot of attitude. Partly because he was a street kid, he didn't

show any vulnerability, so even though he had this great exterior, he did not emote deeply. He had 95% of what we needed, but he didn't have that essential emotional interior. I shared parts of my life with him, I talked honestly with him about things that had broken my heart, I talked to him about loss, about the loss of parents, and then he started to listen and align himself with the character of Ahlo. From that point we knew we would get there and find something very honest and deeply embedded in him from part of his history.

He was this little wheeler dealer dude, and I really liked that about him. Therefore, I went away and I re-wrote around Ki and Lounnam once I had met them: I just wanted to put in more of who they were because they were extraordinary young people.

The first few days of rehearsal were disgraceful. The kids were fighting like hell and they didn't like each other. You've got this tough street kid. He was ten and the little girl was eight and an eight year old girl with a ten year old street kid was really tough. And some of those scenes you see, like when they're having that little argument and she gets to call him an idiot, she really, really wanted to call him an idiot by then.

As we went along, they started trusting each other and sharing more and they became these little soul mates and by the end they were holding hands and he was writing love notes to her and that's kind of on the screen as well. There are moments where I'm asking them to search into each other's souls and they are doing it. She's looking right through him trying to work out whether she believes him or not and so we kind of got there but I wouldn't say it was an easy journey.

Our main aim after the film was to get them into school, and we started a fund to pay for their schooling for the next seven or eight years. Lounnam is doing well in Laos: she is also taking English classes.

It was harder for Ki. He wasn't really connecting with his foster mum and he tried living with one of our executive producers in Bangkok: that didn't really work as he was in and out of school. Then our Laos associate producer based in Sydney said she and her partner would see if he wanted to go and live with them. That has just begun and he has just arrived in Sydney. We are trying to find a way of keeping him here: it is tricky because it is very conservative here in terms of trying to get someone into the country and be a student here. But we are trying."



Asked about the reactions his film had received, the director stated "Honestly, we thought this was a film about a little Laos family and we were very happy with it, we had no idea it was going to connect with people around the world. It is a big and lovely surprise (laughs).

It has also been very empowering for the Laos community in Australia, because Laos can be invisible: not a lot is shot in the country or comes out of it. We had 400 of the Laos community turn up at the Sydney Film Festival and they loved the

film. We invite the Laos community wherever we have been around the world.

The hardest thing is Laos itself, as it hasn't got through the censorship in Laos: so the government says it cannot be shown there. That doesn't come as a huge surprise to us because of the political nature of the dams. We could have cut that whole section out, but then we decided that we didn't want to make a censored piece of propaganda.

We were hoping it wouldn't happen, but on the other hand, we didn't want to make a piece of propaganda or censor the film. It is a pity for the people in Laos as it is going to be a little harder for them to see."

Iain McGlashan

The following submission comes from Committee member, Malcolm Walrond:

In 2012 I had the good fortune to visit Laos, a small country with a population of 6.5 million and one which, like its neighbour Cambodia, suffered terribly in the second half of the 20th century. I found the Lao people to be very friendly, easy-going and patient. Laos is a communist state and the Hammer and Sickle is to be seen on all public buildings. Officially it is the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (LPDR), although our guide suggested these initials might well stand for : Laos - Please Don't Rush. There is much to delight the tourist in Laos, especially in the ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang. But sadly, wherever you travel, you are reminded of its tragic recent history which continues to blight the lives of its people to this day.

During the Indochina War, from 1966 to 1973 (sometimes known as the Secret War as we heard very little about it at the time in the West) this little country gained the unwanted distinction of becoming the most heavily bombed country in the world. In an attempt to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail which passed through Laos en route to South Vietnam, US forces flew more than 500,000 bombing raids, dropping more than two million tons of explosive ordnance, which is more than was used during the whole of the Second World War. It was the equivalent of one plane load of bombs being dropped every eight minutes over twenty-four hours for a period of nine years. Close to 240 million cluster bombs were dropped, 30% of which failed to explode. Although there are organisations which, with the help of international aid, are doing their best to clear the bombs, in a largely rural and mountainous country this is no easy task. If they are on the surface they are all too easy for a small child to pick up, being about the size of a small ball. If they are below the surface, to strike one or step on it while cultivating a field will bring instant death or at the very least horrific injuries. There are still many heavily bombed areas where the villagers are afraid to bring back into cultivation fields which they desperately need in a land still largely reliant on subsistence farming.

Those of you who followed the recent TV series The Mekong River with Sue Perkins, will have seen her visit to the Xayaburi hydroelectric dam, south east Asia's biggest and most controversial engineering project. As well as blocking fish migration and destroying fish stocks, when the waters rise thousands of people will be forced to leave their traditional homes. In the film it is against this background that Ahio's family start their struggle to survive. And what comes through most strongly, in the face of all their troubles, is their resilience.

*The printing of the notes by
Repropoint is undertaken
free of charge*

Repropoint

15 Poole Road, Woking
Tel: 01483 596280

