

## Film Festival Downsizing: A Tale of Two Southeast Asian Cities

Adam Knee

In 2008, two relatively new and internationally visible Southeast Asian film festivals — the Bangkok International Film Festival and the Jakarta International Film Festival — faced the prospect of cancellation; each went ahead only on short notice and in downsized form, though in each case for rather different reasons. The Bangkok festival, held Sept. 23-30, was in fact experiencing downsizing for the second year in a row. Started in its present form in 2003 by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the festival had long been criticized for an emphasis on opulent gala events for VIPs to the detriment of the interests of local filmgoers and, indeed, the filmmakers themselves. One of the clearest pieces of evidence for this was a lack of Thai subtitles for screenings of international films, something roundly criticized by the press for a number of years. The misallocation of efforts and resources was also immediately felt by international visitors such as reporters and critics (myself included), with advance press registration information predictably missing each year, and details about press conferences and schedule changes difficult to come by, as, quite often, were screening tickets themselves. An increased reliance upon untrained volunteer workers after a first round of budget cuts (following the 2006 military coup) and a move to new screening facilities (at the not-quite-completed Central World Plaza) in 2007 occasioned a new set of difficulties that year, including all manner of projection and theater problems, as well as “question-and-answer” sessions with visiting directors that fell apart within moments because of evident moderator shyness. Such problems were decried each year — perhaps most significantly and cogently by the *Bangkok Post* film critic Kong Rithdee — but there seemed to be little action taken on the part of festival organizers.

Many of us felt this was a genuine shame, because, the sponsoring Tourism Authority of Thailand’s aspirations to mount another Pusan (or, even better, an Asian Cannes) notwithstanding, the Bangkok International Film Festival (BKIFF) became very quickly an especially relevant and visible showcase for new Southeast Asian cinemas — and new Thai cinema in particular — right at a time when these were experiencing new growth and starting to garner international interest. However, after the 2007 festival, things took a turn for the worse again, when a scandal broke late in the year in which U.S. authorities charged an American couple with having bribed the governor of the Tourism Authority in order to secure the contracts for the management of the festival. It was unclear after this if the festival would even be able to continue — but after a number of delays and another budget cut, it was indeed (on fairly short

notice) mounted again this year.

The silver lining to this cloud is that this year's downsized BKIFF, now in the hands of film industry organizations (the Federation of National Film Associations and the Thai Film Directors Association), though still receiving financial backing from the Tourism Authority, actually ran quite a bit more smoothly than festivals past, with day-to-day administrative coordination ably handled by filmmaker Paul Spurrier. There were still some of the festival's trademark gala events —though these were fewer and perhaps a shade less opulent — and screenings too were somewhat fewer, making it more difficult to catch certain films. There were still the requisite appearances by some Hollywood names, the legendary Roger Corman giving a seminar on producing and Jean Claude Van Damme creating a flurry of interest when arriving at a film premiere. Corman's was one of several scheduled seminars, which also included an extremely interesting session on Asian production trends that featured Hong Kong producer Peter Chan (who spoke of how pan-Asian successes are now more difficult to achieve than just a few years ago owing to the continuing rise of the Hollywood blockbuster) as well as producers from South Korea and Thailand.



L to R: JiFFest board member Ditta Amahorseya, producer Mira Lesmana, actor Nicholas Saputra.  
Photo: JiFFest.

One further important improvement in this year's festival was the inclusion (at last) of projected Thai subtitles for most non-Thai films. The programming, overseen by critic and filmmaker Pimpaka Towira, as in the past, included a mix of films on the world festival circuit (for example Woody Allen's return to form

in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and the stunningly brutal Brazilian police drama *The Elite Squad*) and films from across Southeast Asia. While the standout among Southeast Asian countries participating in the 2007 festival was arguably Indonesia, with such refreshing and unpredictable films that year as Riri Riza's coming-of-age drama *Three Days to Forever* and Joko Anwar's genre-mixing *Kala*; in this year that distinction quite clearly went to the Philippines, with a good half-dozen features (mostly by young filmmakers) being screened, several of them garnering awards. Brillante Mendoza's *Service (Serbis)*, a slice-of-life portrayal of an urban porn theater, won the Grand Prix Golden Kinnaree Award in the Southeast Asian Competition, while John Torres's autobiographical documentary *Years When I Was a Child Outside* won honorable mention in the same competition and Francis Xavier Pasión's drama *Jay*, about the ethics of reality television, won honorable mention in the main competition. Singapore also had a strong presence at the festival this year with directors Eric Khoo (as a jury member), Jack Neo, and Royston Tan, as well as actresses Fann Wong and Mindee Ong, all in attendance; screenings included Neo's comedy *Money No Enough 2*, and Tan's drama *12 Lotus*.

The festival once again did offer a substantial selection of Thai films released over the previous year, although there were several significant omissions — some of which could be seen at the Ministry of Commerce-sponsored Thailand Entertainment Expo being held simultaneously at the next mega-mall over (for example, the horror hits *The Coffin* and *Art of the Devil 3 (Long Khong 2)*, and the adeptly handled teen romance *Hormones (Pidtermyai huajai wawoon)*). Among Thai films of particular note at the BKIFF were *Queens of Langkasuka* (a big-budget period fantasy from Nonzee Nimibut, the director of *Nang Nak*), *Love of Siam* (one of the only gay-themed Thai commercial features not to lapse into abject homophobia), *Wonderful Town* (Aditya Assarat's much anticipated debut feature film set in a small town experiencing lingering aftereffects of the 2004 tsunami), and two documentaries broaching Thailand's often fraught issues of interreligious coexistence: *The Convert* (a hearteningly nonpartisan look at a Buddhist Thai woman's conversion and marriage to a Muslim Thai man, co-directed by Kong Rithdee, Panu Aree, and Kaweenipon Ketprasit), and *Citizen Juling* (a riveting exploration of the conditions leading to violence in the country's south, which played to a packed theater despite its more than three-and-a-half hour length). There was also an opportunity to see a newly restored print of the 1961 Thai-Shaw Bros co-production *The Boat House (Ruen Pae)*.

One of the distinctive strengths of the festival this year was its willingness to screen a number of long-form films: Raya Martin's experimental drama about a girlhood in Manila, *Now Showing*, ran a full hour longer than even *Citizen Juling*, clocking in at 280 minutes. This is a particular mode of production which is rare to have the opportunity to experience in any formal screening venue, and the audiences were clearly appreciative. Perhaps, indeed, the BKIFF

can build upon this strength and continue to focus on genre-challenging works, while also continuing to serve as a showcase for Southeast Asian cinema. No matter what the festival's administrators choose for the future, it is clear that at this particular transitional juncture, the event is without a well-defined identity or niche — which it will likely need to develop if it is to reinvent itself and thrive again in future years.

In contrast to the BKIFF, the Jakarta International Film Festival (JiFFest) was begun (in 1999) not as the project of a government tourism or trade ministry, but as the work of a number of filmmakers and their supporters, hoping to promote local production in the new environment of liberalization after the fall of the Soeharto regime. The festival developed a loyal following over the years, not only bringing a range of art films from the global festival circuit (as well as from across Southeast Asia) to Jakarta audiences, but making active interventions in promoting and fostering a newly reviving Indonesian film industry, both by showcasing all of a given year's local feature production in free public screenings and by sponsoring an annual script development competition, the winners of which receive funding for film production and training in script development workshops.

2006 and 2007 were some of the JiFFest's most impressive years ever in terms of both attendance (which reached a record of 63,000 admissions in 2006) and programming. The 2007 program included special sidebars on a number of countries, programs of documentaries and of shorts from around the world, and a new section devoted to Southeast Asian films, along with an English-subtitled retrospective of the work one of the foremost figures in Malaysian film history, actor-director-songwriter P. Ramlee.

It was quite a frustration to many of those involved, then, that despite the festival's strengths, it ran into trouble in 2008 — not as the outcome of past problems, but purely because of a lack of adequate funding (owing in part, in turn, to the late-2008 global economic slow-down). As JiFFest co-founder Shanty Harmayn explained, with very little government funding available for the event, some 60 percent of the financial support initially came from overseas foundations and cultural initiatives (such as the Ford Foundation), with much of the remainder coming from corporate sponsors. By 2008, however, some of the initial foundation funding was (as previously scheduled) being phased out, and, given difficult economic times, not enough local corporate sponsorship was materializing to take its place (and even some of this was being substantially reduced). With only four weeks remaining before the scheduled start of the festival in December, it became evident (when one major hoped-for sponsor backed out) that there would not be enough funding to run the full ten-day festival as planned. In view of the importance of the event and its growing momentum in its tenth year, however, the decision was taken not to cancel it altogether, but rather to reduce its length to a more manageable five days (Dec. 5-9).

Given the minuscule lead-time, what the festival organizers managed to pull off was impressive indeed. As might have been expected, some of the special events were a bit more low-key than in the past, and there were fewer international guests and journalists in attendance than previously, and fewer opportunities to catch screenings of Southeast Asian films. But the vast majority of events and screenings were coordinated smoothly and professionally, and an eager Jakarta audience thronged them, with tickets for many films selling out shortly after becoming available. Indeed, the final attendance figure of better than 28,000 admissions over the course of five days (averaging 90 percent of seating capacity) compared quite favorably to 2007's figure of 54,000 over ten days — and made clear the continuing demand for what JiFFest has to offer.

Local films at the festival included Riri Riza's hugely successful *Laskar Pelangi* (produced by Mira Lesmana), a drama based on a well-known novel



At the Jakarta International Film Festival (L to R): actors Arthur Berning and Rolf Kristian Larsen, about growing up in a mining town on a rural Indonesian island in the 1970s, *Asian Cinema*'s Adam Knee, director Aditya Assarat, critic and programmer Paolo Bertolin, and notable for (among other things) its impressive performances from non-professional child actors; and two (often harrowing) Nia Dinata-produced omnibus films focusing on the hardships of women's lives in Indonesia, the drama *Chants of Lotus* (*Perempuan Punya Cerita*) and the documentary *At Stake* (*Pertaruhan*). At a completely different end of the cinematic spectrum, Dinata also had producer credit on the adult comedy *Quickie Express*, directed by relative newcomer Dimas Djayadiningsrat from a script by Joko Anwar, which won the festival's award for best Indonesian feature film. Another

notable presence at JiFFest was the prolific veteran director Garin Nugroho, represented by the characteristically intriguing and challenging drama *Under the Tree* (a Bali-set drama that interweaves multiple plot lines concerning three women's encounters with local spirituality and subterranean familial bonds) and the music documentary *Teak Leaves at the Temple*.

Other Asian countries in evidence at the festival included Japan, with the latest works by established directors Takeshi Kitano (*Achilles and the Tortoise*) and Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Tokyo Sonata*); Singapore, with an embassy-sponsored local premiere of Eric Khoo's *My Magic* (at which I was genuinely afraid star



*Queens of Langkasuka* director Nonzee Nimibutr flanked by stars Saengthong Gate-Uthong (L) and Amanda Pescingiani (R). Photo: Kristin Dowling/City Images. Francis Rosco's live fire-eating performance might set the theater alight); and Thailand, with *Wonderful Town* and *The Convert*. *The Convert* proved to be of particular interest to Jakarta audiences in providing an (alternative) image of relaxed and friendly day-to-day interactions of Muslim and Buddhist Thais, as a kind of counterpoint to the wide reporting of interreligious strife in Thailand; the film's theme of interreligious attraction, moreover, was also a focus of a number of other films in the festival, most notably *Donkey in Lahore* (by Australian-Iranian filmmaker Faramarz K. Rahber).

Among non-screening events, the most significant was a forum on "Ten Years of Indonesian Film Revival," which featured an (apparently unprecedented) public discussion among key film producers, the Indonesian

Minister of Trade, top representatives of the Ministries of Culture and Tourism and of Finance, representatives of the various competing Indonesian exhibition and distribution companies, and local film scholars about the current status and future potentials of the Indonesian film industry. A presentation from Mira Lesmana reported very healthy growth in local film production (from 2 features in 1998 to 78 in 2008), in attendance at locally-made films, and in the number of film screens available — but cautioned that Indonesian filmmakers are nevertheless facing serious difficulties in several areas. Among the problems cited: a lack of film education programs within Indonesia; a very limited number of screens anywhere outside the capital city of Jakarta; a high tax burden on filmmakers; complicated and often impractical government regulations; censorship pressures from both the government and special interest groups; a lack of readily available data about ticket sales and audience demographics; a dearth of private financing for independent sector films; and a lack of government support for the international promotion of Indonesian film.

While those assembled for the event naturally could not provide an immediate “quick fix” for such a range of substantial issues, it was clearly most significant and useful that these could be aired with key players in the industry and representatives of the chief regulatory entities present to acknowledge them and provide immediate feedback, pointing the way to possible solutions; for example, several of those in attendance did agree to work on providing ready access to data, and government officials did acknowledge an understanding of some of the specific regulatory problems that producers described (e.g., difficulties in bringing film prints into the country for exhibition or sending them abroad for processing) and suggested workarounds for some of them. The very “hands on” nature of this forum, moreover, reflected one of the distinctive strengths of the JiFFest (which it will hopefully have the economic means to continue pursuing in the coming years): a genuine concern with advocating for local filmmakers while also fostering new talents.