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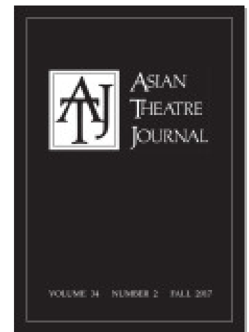

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Drenched in Victory, Facing Drought: Staging Transitions in Myanmar's Performing Arts

Catherine Diamond

Since 2011, Myanmar's military government has been shifting toward civilian leadership, and in the 2015 elections the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a decisive victory, though she was not able to assume the role of prime minister. This indicates that there are still many steps in the process toward guaranteeing civil liberties for all Myanmar citizens. Theatre, music, dance, and performance art during the past four years reveal both the eager hopefulness for more freedoms and the fears of sectarian violence as the impoverished country emerges from more than fifty years of exploitative misrule. Relaxation of laws governing public assembly and expression has encouraged cross-cultural collaboration, productions by minority religions, deeper probing of social injustices, new interest in Shakespearean plays, greater outreach to remote populations, and the establishment of new international festivals. Myanmar is undergoing an artistic as well as sociopolitical transition, and performing artists are challenged to be both reflective and guiding forces to meet the needs of the great diversity of its peoples.

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Around 6 p.m., the bacchanalian festivities of Thingyan (Water Festival) began to subside, and shortly after, the large stage in front of the Yangon city hall lit up for the evening's performance of song and dance. Several of the city's arteries had been blocked off to become sites of drenched dancers and singers gyrating on *pandals*—temporary stages. Youth on the backs of pickup trucks slowly cruised back and

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forth, dousing rivals and being doused in turn as electro and hip-hop music throbbed in rival beats. Yet compared to recent years, the Water Festival had distinct restraints—some streets were excluded from the activities so that emergency vehicles could get through; a noon break gave the entertainers a rest until 3 p.m., when the music activities by some of the country's most famous singers that resumed were open to all rather than the privileged few of the past. In other parts of Myanmar, however, the 2016 Thingyan was celebrated without any water, for farmlands were facing severe droughts from Chinese dams upriver and the effects of El Niño.

The Yangon government both democratized and "civilized" the city's longest and most exuberant festival, which in 2016 also celebrated the landslide election victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) a few months before. Since 2011, Myanmar has been undergoing a steady opening up—the release of political prisoners, visits to and from European and American officials, the lifting of some economic sanctions, the increase of foreign direct investment, and more press freedom abetted by inexpensive phone and internet connectivity. After NLD victories in the legislature and presidency, the country now has its first nonmilitary government since 1962. Yet the economy is still in the hands of the junta and its cronies, who are busy making deals before the new government takes over. It was of interest, therefore, to see what hopes and fears had been percolating through the performing arts over the past four years and how artists were expressing the transitions the society was undergoing, especially as most of them had made critique of the military government their artistic modus operandi.

Several changes were readily observable: ensembles used physical theatre to extend their social outreach to underprivileged areas of the country and to avoid language differences as well as censorship; minorities previously cowed became more vocal through performance; national institutions became more open to foreign visitors and collaborators; foreign texts, such as Shakespearean plays, previously not popular, were receiving new interest; provocative dance, such as hip hop, formerly tentatively displayed was now openly flaunted and performed with high technical competence for charitable causes; and there was greater experimentation in some areas of traditional performance. Individual artists and performance groups still negotiate between the sponsorship and support of foreign cultural entities—such as L'Institut Français, the Goethe Institute, the Swiss and Japanese embassies—and the expectations of local spectators unaccustomed to internationally influenced contemporary art styles. Because of the long years of cultural isolation, the public is more familiar with the clearly defined dyad of pop (foreign) and traditional (local).[1] Despite the ongoing *zat pwe*,

the traditional all-night variety show at the pagoda festivals, which features music, dance, and *pya zat* (short modern spoken dramas), Myanmar theatre is just beginning to again develop sustained stand-alone dramatic performance that is contemporary, artistic, and reflective. In the early 1970s, spoken drama was popular in Mandalay and Yangon, where theatres produced new plays and innovative staging, but then declined into maudlin melodrama for the pagoda festival presentations.[2] The current *mintha* (literally "prince," but actor/manager of theatre troupes) now usually exclude not only the *zat gyi*, the classical drama that was once the climax to the evening's entertainment, but also, increasingly, the modern *pya zat* from their program, saying the audience does not like it anymore. Signs are, however, that as Myanmar's middle class reemerges, various forms of dramatic art are resuming in the country's cultural life.

Water Festival and *Zat Pwe*

Each evening after the water dousing ceased, the "dry" performance on the city hall stage featured more tame pop and traditional songs and dance than the wild gyrating under the hoses. Among the more unusual presentations was that of the popular *mintha* Moe Minn. In his forties, the charismatic and vivacious performer is perhaps best known for his rock-and-roll cover songs, especially his adaptations of Michael Jackson. He idolizes the American performer, for he says Jackson was not just a singer and dancer, but a complete performer who had a "stage mind," and it is this quality that Moe Minn most admires and tries to emulate (Moe Minn 2016). However as a senior member of the Drama Association, which oversees all professional performance, Moe Minn must also pay due respect to traditional forms, and he is a consummate exponent of Burmese dance. Nor does he shy away from the dramatic staples of the traditional theatre, the *jataka*s, the 550 Buddhist rebirth stories that provide many of the narratives. The *zat* in *zat pwe* refers to *jataka*s, which, in the nineteenth century, could only be performed by marionettes until the twentieth century's most famous *mintha*, U Po Sein, appropriated them for his live performance.

So while in 2012, Moe Minn personified Prince Vessantara, the penultimate incarnation of the Buddha, seated on a golden throne, in 2016, he dramatized the lesser known *Mora Sekka*, the peacock *jataka*, creating an hour-long operatic piece for the National Theatre. Since that initial performance, he has been dancing a shortened version for the Water Festival and the various pagoda festivals where he is employed to provide entertainment. Researching the origins of the dance, he said that a delegation from the Pyu dynasty (ca. second to eleventh centuries ce) visited the Tang court in Chang'an in 802 and

was influenced by a Chinese peacock dance, making it one of the oldest extant dances. Usually traditional performance begins with a *natkadaw* (*nat* wife or spirit medium) ritual dance that was considered the most ancient of extant dances, dating to the twelfth century, but Moe Minn reveals the peacock dance might be older, though not purely of Burmese origin (see Plate 1).

The narrative, however, is not Chinese but Indian. A golden peacock, an incarnation of the Buddha, meditates on a high mountain. A king's wife desires to hear its wisdom, but the king and his hunter fail to capture the bird, and, annoyed at his failure, the king starts a rumor that whoever eats the bird will gain immortality. Six subsequent kings also fail, but finally a hunter tricks it by training a peahen whose sexy call interferes with its meditation. Faced with being consumed by the seventh king, the bird persuades him that no living thing can live forever, and because his avian flesh is itself mortal it cannot possibly provide immortality. Moe Minn's dance was spectacularly costumed and combined mimetic peacock movements with traditional Burmese dance. He used balletic lifts with his female partner, going against the traditional prohibition of men and women touching each other on stage. Half-naked "savages," the king's hunters, capture the golden peacock, but confronted by a defiant peacock chorus, they free him and raise him up so that the golden peacock can ascend back to its mountain abode.

The story and the style's antiquity notwithstanding, several people in the audience commented that it had been a long while since a peacock dance had been performed, since the "fighting peacock" gazing at a large white star was chosen as the emblem for the NLD in 2011, an image previously forbidden by the generals (*Telegraph* 2011). The fighting peacock was already well known in the 1930s when the All-Burma Students Union led by independence hero Aung San, the father of Suu Kyi, adopted it, and it was raised again by university students during the 1988 democracy uprising. The fighting peacock became even more affiliated with NLD when, in 2012, the rap song "The Fighting Peacock" became part of Aung San Suu Kyi's election campaign. Rapper Anegga said, "We want to make our song for the NLD have, like, very booming, banging beats. So we want to take samples from Latin samba music and, like, dance music . . . and then on one part of the song we want to sing reggae" (Freeman 2015). While the rhyme gets lost in translation, the lyrics go, "A vote from me will be a change for the country / And for the leader who will implement health and education. / Hold our hands and support the people's leader / for our leader who will implement peace" (Freeman 2015). The song was sung by many of the country's leading singers at NLD rallies, but similar images were appropriated by splinter parties, potentially creating con-

fusion for illiterate voters who rely on such symbols to cast their vote (Phyo Thiha Cho 2015).

Thus without having to introduce anything overtly political, Moe Minn presented an elegant classical style dance with some modern innovations that tapped into people's feelings of overcoming tyranny. Moreover, he aided the new government by doing what preceding rulers did and appropriated traditional culture to bolster its legitimacy. The dancers were all part of his theatrical troupe that then went to the nearby town of Bago (Pegu) to perform nine different all-night shows at the pagoda festival. The performers have to rehearse new works during the day while performing at night, and the *mintha*'s performances throughout have to hold the whole show together.

Shakespeare Stimulus

Like other persevering *mintha*, Moe Minn strives to find a balance between preserving the integrity of traditional forms and introducing novelty. He wants to continue developing himself as an artist but also keep the *zat pwe* vital and relevant in this period of transition, when greater opening up both to Myanmar's ASEAN neighbors and the West as well as the obsession with digital media could mean its demise. His next project is to mount an adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew* in Burmese style. Few of Shakespeare's plays have been translated into the Burmese language, and none have been performed in their entirety. Even excerpts did not meet with success—an odd situation for a country that was colonized by the British for more than a century. Unlike India, "Burma" embraced little of Britain's literary culture—the passion of *Wuthering Heights* making it a popular exception. In order to see the rare presentation of anything Shakespearean, Moe Minn drove from Bago to Yangon to attend the British Council's celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the bard's death before rushing back to appear on the *zat pwe* stage.

The event included scenes from two plays that had been previously translated—*King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*—performed by the five-member Thukhuma Khayeethee Theatre (Art Traveler Theatre, TKT, 2009), headed by Ko Thila Min, who has worked with visiting companies and collaborates with the music school founded by Kit Young, Gitameit (Music Friendship, 2003). TKT performed Lear's scene in the storm with Kent, played by a young woman, and the Fool, who put on an antic disposition in the style of the *lubyet*, the Burmese comedian. He also carried a pageboy marionette whose dancing illustrated some of his advice to the king (Fig. 1). This was a first step in bridging the familiarity gap between the two theatre traditions. With *Julius Caesar*, a different tack was taken; while Antony spoke at Caesar's funeral, bear-

ers carried in Caesar's covered corpse, which was revealed to be the blood-spattered shape of Myanmar—a gesture that brought applause from the audience. As Burmese performance in Yangon has been rife with political innuendo for so many years, it will take time for performers to find other themes to develop and for audiences to find other modes of interpretation, similar to the transition made by Eastern European theatres after 1989.

Even in the current period of relative openness, certain subjects remain out of bounds, as four comedians in the group Harbelay discovered when they presented a skit on television in which they clowned as dancing and singing monks. When the ultranationalist Buddhist organization—the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion—complained, the comedians were obliged to apologize to its founder, the monk U Wirathu, also known as Ma Ba Tha (Aung Kyaw Min 2016). Also the de facto leader of 969, the radical movement that disseminates leaflets and sermons against the country's Muslim residents, U Wirathu called for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses. Even though according to the last official census, Muslims make up only around 5 percent of the country's population, he opines that Buddhism is under threat because Buddhist women who marry Muslim men must convert to Islam and because Muslims are producing more children.

Figure 1. Soe Moe Thu as Lear with his Fool in Thukhuma Khayeethee Theatre's presentation of *King Lear* (2016) at the British Council, Yangon. Note the pageboy puppet on the ground. (Photo: Catherine Diamond)

Violence between Muslims and Buddhists periodically occurred throughout the twentieth century, often fueled by economics and politics, and in the years running up to the 2015 election, violence again flared up throughout the country, in particular against the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim community in Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state.[3] In 1942, an incident known as the Arakanese massacre involved communal violence between Rohingya recruited by the British against the Japanese invading army, and Burmese Buddhist nationalists who sought to oust the British colonizers. Fighting on opposite sides resulted in suspicions of national loyalty and fostered bad will against the Rohingya residents although Aung San leading the Burmese eventually joined the British. In 1962, General Ne Win enacted the Burmese Nationality Law, recognizing 135 ethnic groups but denying citizenship to those who arrived after 1823, the beginning of British colonial rule, which supposedly was the case of the Rohingya despite proof of their longer residency, and thus they remain stateless (Pongstaphone 2015: v).

To try to defuse the ethnic and religious tensions and to promote tolerance for diversity and the civil engagement necessary for the new democratic society, TKT spent three years touring the country to teach acting techniques and promote ethnic harmony among youth, especially those who might be susceptible to extremists. Collaborating with schools and youth groups, using physical theatre and their own brand of forum theatre, TKT adopted an allegory of friendship between a lizard and a gecko, characters from a popular animation show. They are friends because they seem similar to each other, but when family, friends, and disgruntled elements in the society emphasize their differences, they struggle to maintain their affinity. TKT's appeal is to the majority of moderate Buddhists appalled by the rhetoric and actions of Buddhist nationalists, and their aim is to persuade them to maintain a tolerant stance rather than give way to extremist attitudes. TKT also went to the states of Shan, Chin, and Kachin, where many of the inhabitants are ethnic minorities and Christian, and military struggles against the government have been ongoing until recent truces were signed. But with the opportunity offered by the British Council to present scenes from Shakespeare, Ko Thila Min expressed the group's desire to move away from applied theatre activities for a while to cultivate its artistic side by developing their Shakespeare scenes into full-length presentations (Ko Thila Min 2016).

Antigone Caught between Buddhists and Muslims

Buddhist-instigated violence took the Western world by surprise in part because of its infatuation with the beautiful and articulate Aung San Suu Kyi, who refused to take a stand against the radical monks, and

its assumption that Buddhism is among the world's most peaceful religions, exemplified by Myanmar's monks leading the Saffron Revolution in 2007 by holding their rice bowls upside down to symbolize their rejection of the government's hypocritical displays of religiosity.[4] Perhaps feelings are still too raw and volatile for most arts groups to handle, especially while the political situation is also delicate and the poverty that drives much of the hatred between groups has not been alleviated. Commissioned by the L'Institut Français as part of its Image of Woman festival, the New Yangon Theatre Institute (NYTI), however, addressed the conflict head-on in *Antigone . . . Antagonist?* (2015). Spurred by the outbreak of violence in 2012, Thai American director Ruth Pongstaphone and Burmese comedian-actress May Thet Zaw began developing their Burmese presentation of The Living Theatre co-founder Judith Malina's translation of Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone*. While Pongstaphone worked between Myanmar, Thailand, and New York, studying news reports and personal accounts on Facebook, May Thet Zaw went to Rakhine state to investigate both sides of the conflict, where her slightly dark skin and thick hair made it difficult for people to identify her ethnically. The Burmese theatre exponents are often fearless in their readiness to go into trouble zones to see the situation for themselves, such as in the aftermath of Typhoon Nargis, when the government refused outside assistance and did little itself, leaving it to civilian volunteers to help affected communities.[5] Perhaps because the country has been "served" by censored media and been so long out of bounds for international NGOs, people are more accustomed to finding solutions themselves.

Performed in a Brechtian agitprop style with T-shirt costumes and actors wearing signs to indicate their change of roles, the production adapted the text in which Brecht had already transformed the determined headstrong character of the Greek Antigone into an innocent victim (Fig. 2). The NYTI's version emphasized the innocent scapegoats caught in the crossfire of ethnic violence. It included references to two Burmese migrant workers suspected of killing British tourists in Thailand and being executed even though they testified that they were tortured into making confessions. Many Burmese felt that the two were scapegoats of the Thai police wishing to expediently repair the country's "tourist-friendly" image, while Pongstaphone and May Thet Zaw considered that within Myanmar, Rohingya also were scapegoats in government-instigated reprisals that could be used to justify the resumption of military control. Exploiting Brecht's version of political melodrama, Pongstaphone "wondered about our Antigone, what if she were innocent? What if she wasn't really Antigone and didn't even have a brother to bury? What if she was scapegoated by others? What if she

was made into a public enemy to suit the purposes of political powers who wanted to maintain their control? Or what if the people made her an enemy so that individually, they would not be blamed? How can the disempowered regain their personal power?" (p. ix).

When they were about to begin rehearsing at L'Institut Français on Pyay Road, another incident impacted their interpretation of the heroine and her society. In March 2015, a group of Mandalay students upset by a new education bill that would restrict academic independence and student union activities began marching to Yangon via Letpaden, the site of a contentious Chinese copper mine protested by villagers since 2011, where they were attacked by police. Students in Yangon formed a sympathy protest and the government blocked Pyay road, sending in its vigilante force to contain them. Pongstaphone and May Thet Zaw were gripped by a photo of a girl student in a throat hold by one of the paramilitary "duty guards." She became the face of their Antigone. The look of glee on the boy holding her reflects the spirit of this license given to one portion of the populace to repress the other. "In this image . . . we found our Antigone and the citizen guard who would interrogate her in our play; they are like brother and sister at war" (p. x).

Figure 2. May Thet Zaw as Antigone in *Antigone . . . Antagonist?* (2015) by New Yangon Theatre Institute at the French Institute, Yangon. (Photo: Courtesy of Ruth Pongstaphone, NYTI)

May Thet Zaw played Antigone, portrayed as an antagonist to all authoritarian regimes, and was silent throughout most of the performance. To have her silence instigate a rebellion in each of the individuals invested a great deal of power to it, and I suspect that a heroine has to have more than sullen innocence to affect that kind of change in people. Pongstaphone insists, "We wanted people to question complicity and ask the question, 'What will I stand for? And where will I draw the line?'" (p. xi). In the end, "the people," who had been easily manipulated into believing Antigone to be a fifth-column traitor, refuse to partake in her execution. Each has to make an individual decision and face the consequences, but a momentum is also built up, and people are swayed by the actions of others. We do not see that process of deliberation in their minds in the performance, only their abrupt refusal. English actor Ralph Cotterill narrated from the Malina translation while the rest of the play was in Burmese with snippets of French and the singing of "L'Internationale."[6]

Making theatre about major political transitions while in the midst of them, one is challenged both to capture the passion and the complexity of all the participating factions, extracting information from on-the-spot informers as much as from trained journalists. Perhaps the play could have acknowledged the actual acts of courage and generosity that took place across religious divides, such as in Lashio, Shan state, where when sword-wielding Buddhist gangs began patrolling the streets on motorbikes, 1,400 Muslims were able to take shelter in a Buddhist monastery (O'Connor 2013). In 2013, U Wie Douktah became a symbol of tolerance when in Meiktila, where some of the worst violence took place, the fifty-seven-year-old abbot and his disciples provided sanctuary to more than 900 Muslims, standing guard over them through the night (Watson and Maung 2015).[7]

The Dilemmas of Zaganar, Myanmar's Number One Jester

There was no Creon in the NYTI performance; his power was expressed through the invisible manipulation of others even in the process of political reform. This deep suspicion of the generals was also expressed by Myanmar's most famous performer, the comedian U Thura (known as Zaganar or "Tweezers"). He had kept people's hopes alive ever since the 1988 uprising, delivering satirical jokes both in and out of prison until he was last released in 2011. Second in popularity only to Aung San Suu Kyi, and frequently serving as the people's spokesman, Zaganar was frequently jailed for talking to foreign journalists (Pilling 2014).[8] He is now worried that the political transition, despite the generals taking off their military uniforms to don civilian

clothes, is being undermined by the army behind the scenes. As a performer, he understands the performativity of Myanmar politics: "They are very good performers," he says, adding that Thein Sein (the president before the November 2015 elections) has worked hard to create an image for himself as a moderate. "He's very smart. He always smiles and says, 'Oh, my fellow people, I love you.' . . . It's a game. So I'm very afraid. We don't want to be the pieces in the game—the pawn or the bishop or even the knight" (Pilling 2014).

Performing first live on the *anyeint pwe* stages, Zaganar transformed the genre that formerly featured a female dancer with accompanying comedians by sidelining the dancer and emphasizing the satirists. He has since appeared in many films, but his last cinema project turned out to be a bust. In 2005, he began drafting a screenplay about Suu Kyi's father, the hero of the nation, General Aung San. "There is a movie about Gandhi; there is a movie about Uncle Ho [Chi Minh]. Where is the movie about our leader" (McLaughlin 2015). It was supposed to be released in February 2015 on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, but all that has been filmed is a tepid amateurish teaser that can be seen on YouTube.

One of the problems was achieving democratic consensus about the national hero. The film committee scrapped Zaganar's original script and commissioned three well-known historians to write a new version. What they submitted in 2013 was an unwieldy, overly detailed narrative that tried to balance historical accuracy without causing offense to anyone. Even a trimmed-down version that was hurriedly translated into English still resembled a biased biopic that failed to capture the imagination.

Suu Kyi herself had been involved in the production, but when the screenplay foundered, she consulted Canadian producer Niv Fichman, who suggested that it could focus on the unusual friendship between the Burmese general and the Japanese colonel Suzuki Keiji, who advocated for Burmese independence, to create a more intimate view within the historical narrative. His advice was rejected by the committee (McLaughlin 2015). Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, the film's director, said he wanted to "prioritize heroism." But in trying to elevate Aung San, the committee wound up with a dull protagonist that Zaganar criticized: "Aung San is very similar to Superman. . . . He is not like a human being" (McLaughlin 2015).

Maung Bo Bo, a student at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, had an interesting take on the difficulty of representing Aung San, saying he has been transformed into a *nat*, the indigenous spirits of historical persons who met with tragic deaths. Aung San's dramatic martyrdom, occurring before he had a

chance to be corrupted, qualified him. In times of political difficulty, strife, and dissatisfaction with the government, many people looked back to Aung San and found comfort in his tragic but unblemished legacy (McLaughlin 2015). By 2016, financial support for the project had dwindled and Suu Kyi, occupied with the election aftermath of jostling for cabinet positions, gave the film little priority. Zaganar, however, insists it must still be made.

Evangelical Musicals

While the cinematic version of Aung San's life remains "on hold," another savior was successfully launched on the Burmese stage. Though Buddhist-Muslim tensions are only beginning to find theatrical expression, the country's small Catholic community surprisingly came to the fore, appropriating no less than the National Theatre for its debut performance in 2013.[9] Inspired by Burmese archbishop Charles Po, who was later appointed Myanmar's first cardinal by Pope Francis in 2015, two hundred Catholics came together to celebrate five hundred years of their presence in the country to perform *Jesus of Nazareth*, written and directed by Friar David Michael.[10] Organized by the local Catholic Creative Artists Association (CCAA), comprising forty professional musicians, singers, actors, technicians, and composers, they, along with the volunteer cast and crew donated not only time but money to make the production (2016).[11] It sold out the 1,500-seat theatre, attracting both Catholic spectators from all over Myanmar as well as Buddhists curious about this first full-length Western-style Burmese musical.[12]

Although European missionaries may have arrived in the country as early as the thirteenth century, most of the country's Christians are Protestants and belong to ethnic minorities in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Shan states, having been converted in the early nineteenth century. Many of the Christianized Bamar majority, however, are Catholics and descend from Portuguese who married with Burmese and served as mercenaries in the internecine struggles of various courts from the sixteenth century onward. They were among the soldiers that defended the last Burmese king, Thibaw, against the British in 1885.[13] Despite their long presence, Simon Pau Khan En, a professor at the Myanmar Institute of Theology, remarked that "Christianity was and still is an alien religion to the people of Myanmar due to three factors: (a) The identification of the Christian mission with British colonialism by Burmese people; (b) The negative attitude of missionaries towards the religion and culture of the Burmese people; (c) The conversion en masse of tribal groups (ethnic minorities) to Christianity" (2001: 40).

After deposing King Thibaw, the British colonists dismantled

both the monastery school system and the sangha, replacing it with missionary schools, which caused a backlash. Attacks were strident in the 1930s when Buddhist extremist nationalists condemned the education system as part of the White man's 3M-scheme (merchant, military, and mission) (Pau 2015: 71). Reverse discrimination was instituted when General Ne Win declared Buddhism the state religion in 1966 and all missionaries were expelled. Churches were burned and promotions in civil departments were denied to Christians. In 2007, "The military regime in Burma was intent on wiping out Christianity," particularly in the rebellious ethnic minority regions (Pattisson 2007). Christians were then criticized for not partaking in the Saffron Revolution of that year led by Buddhist monks. In 2011, when democratic principles were beginning to be put in place by President Thein Sein, religious freedom was not fully implemented. Christians, understandably, remained quiescent about their rights when they were still uncertain about their status.[14]

Thus producing a spectacular proselytizing musical to a mostly Catholic audience was an extraordinary event. *Jesus of Nazareth* also used the novelty, perhaps even the exoticism, of its Middle Eastern spectacle and musical elements to attract people into the theatre who would not normally go. A rather straightforward retelling of the gospel, the result was nonetheless a modern Burmese musical. The audience was surprised when the show began not with the customary *natkadaw* ritual dance that opens theatrical performance but with a gospel prayer, and the traditional candle dance, the dancers holding votive candles in each palm, that was also modernized so that the dancers had to scuttle somewhat awkwardly to keep up with the quicker tempo of the Western music. Everyone in the chorus was dressed in elegant *longyi*, but the singing was accompanied by Western instrumentation, not the traditional *saing waing* (drum circle) ensemble. The chorus remained upstage in two rows throughout the three-hour presentation, rising to support the soloists who performed without dance.

The opening tableau began with John the Baptist clearly setting the scene for later conflicts between the believers and skeptics. All wore colorful "Holy Land" robes and mantles, and though the poster for the show depicted a handsome fair-haired Jesus, the disciples wore curly black wigs and beards, while Freddy Lynn in the lead role appeared with his own shoulder-length black hair (Fig. 3). John's prediction of the fall of the immoral Herod brought applause, so did Jesus's admonition to a converted Jewish tax collector not to take more than the law required. The audience also sympathized when the fishermen complained of having too little money to both feed their large families and pay taxes.

Miracles played a large part in the drama, as the audience first laughed when Jesus spat into the dirt and applied the mud to the blind man's eyes. The more suspenseful scene of the enraged Christ shouting at the devil to leave the madman's body and enter a herd of swine was resonant with *nat pwe* practices when mediums go into a trance to expel demons. The accompanying song was the only number that featured contemporary dance, with "demons" in tight black shirts and trousers as they performed a not very provocative pop composition. Nonetheless, as they made gestures of pain, the implication was that they were personifying the immortality of Western modernity in a pop display, even though the production used the talents of many of the country's top pop and rap singers to back up the lip-synching lead actors. These singers, dressed in casual contemporary clothes, stood stage right in clear view of the audience, providing a kind of double performance.

Despite the formality imposed by the National Theatre environment, when Jesus produced the feast from the loaves and fishes, bread was distributed among the spectators so that all those on and off stage ate together. Interludes between the acts were used to thank the sponsors, to perform more acts of public donation, and to acknowledge the actors. The acting typified that of the *zat pwe*, broadly stylized, the actors stepping forward to deliver their lines and then retreating. The

Figure 3. Freddy Lynn as Jesus and Chit Thu Wai as Mary (in white) in *Jesus of Nazareth* (2013). (Photo: Courtesy of White Legend Media)

evil Pharisees chortled like the melodramatic villains they were, the innocent children gave robust performances, and Jesus's conversation with the woman from Samaria resonated with aspirations for equality of ethnic groups in the country. The performance instilled pride in the Catholics who attended as well as evoked the country's penchant for finding political subtext in all performance, such as when John spoke of revolution for Israel, the removal of Herod, and the grappling for positions of power in the vacuum.

In 2014, another evangelical musical "blew in" and was staged in the National Theatre. *Two from Galilee* was directed by Richard Montez, the founder of Cornerstone Arts, a project that mounts original Christian plays around the world in a Broadway style (Fig. 4). A former Disney dancer-choreographer, Montez noted that theatre attracted larger audiences than preaching and set upon a whirlwind campaign to spread the Christian message through musical theatre. Presented in February to coincide with Valentine's Day, *Two from Galilee* was a love story about Joseph and Mary, the first part emphasizing their struggle to love against the tradition of parental decision making, while the second part focused on the birth of Christ. Based on a novel by Marjorie Holmes, the script, which had been performed in many countries, was translated into Burmese but otherwise made little concession to

Figure 4. Richard Montez's *Two from Galilee* (2014) at the National Theatre, Yangon. (Photo: Freddy Lynn, White Legend Media)

"Burmeseness" either in its mise-en-scène or in its music and dance style, in part because it was a collaboration with amateur actors from Chin state who have their own distinct cultural norms. Ticket proceeds went to refugees at Hote Laing High School in Chin state.

Freddy Lynn, who had starred as Christ in *Jesus of Nazareth*, served as assistant director to help audition and rehearse local performers who Montez, accustomed to professional scheduling, found endearing but undisciplined. Because of its Broadway style and Montez's experience as an entertainer, it had much more movement and set dance pieces than *Jesus of Nazareth*, such as the spectacular scene of the angels announcing Christ's birth. The day before opening, however, the producer canceled and they had to quickly find substitute donors. The show proved popular with the live audience and was broadcast on television throughout the country as a special cultural event. To give an openly evangelical presentation airtime on the government-controlled media signifies some change at the official level toward other religions, even though full recognition remains to be implemented.

The National Theatre and the University of Culture

The use of the National Theatre by private groups is a new trend as it was formerly for government-sponsored events before the junta moved the capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw in 2006. It held performances such as Union Day celebrations, in which all of the major ethnic groups were brought in to represent themselves in music and dance to reinforce the army's role in preserving national unity. In addition, it was the location for the annual National Performing Arts Competition, which featured a nonstop week-long lineup of traditional instrumental and vocal music, dance, puppetry, and theatre ensemble presentations based either on a *jataka* or the *Ramayana*. After Western countries imposed sanctions, there was little international cultural exchange except small-scale events on embassy grounds. Local groups did not make use of the theatre because they either could not afford it or did not want to be associated with the government activities that took place in it. That situation began to change in 2012 when touring groups such as the Sasha Waltz Contemporary Dance Company from Germany appeared in the theatre, as well as a first-time gathering of all the country's most esteemed traditional dance exponents to reprise the dances of the greatest *mintha*, U Po Sein, in honor of his 130th anniversary. Local pop singers began to hold concerts there, and in 2016, the Myanmar National Symphony Orchestra played with Japanese soloists. The graduating students of the University of Culture also began staging large-scale variety shows there to demonstrate their skills.

In 2014, the Drama Department came under the direction of

Khaing Tun, who had graduated from the department but then worked in the new capital of Naypyidaw to assist in choreographing the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2013 Southeast Asian Games—the first time Myanmar got to host the event (Khaing Tun 2016). This experience of coordinating large-scale music and dance productions with spectacular lighting effects influenced the 2015 presentation in the National Theatre given by the graduating class. Lavish costumes were designed to resemble the flowers for a new "Lotus Dance," and soloists as bees and butterflies flitted between them. The dancers performed traditional Burmese dance movements, but their body positions were more varied, and they were arranged into choreographed patterns that constantly shifted across the large space, creating an "event"-style performance that emphasized group spectacle rather than the virtuosity or personality of the solo performer (Plate 2).

Of the 550 *jataka*s that provide the basis for most Burmese Buddhist plays, many are minor tales unfamiliar to the general public. The students performed one of these lesser-known stories, the *Manicora jataka* about the Buddha as a young householder who marries a beautiful woman, Sujata, who shows her virtue through her devotion to her husband, his parents, and the gods (see Fig. 5). Wishing to visit

FIGURE 5. University of Culture drama students perform *Manicora jataka* (2015) featuring a wise wife. (Photo: Courtesy of the Drama Department, University of Culture)

her own parents, they travel to her home, but on the way she is seen and desired by the king riding on an elephant. The king has a jewel planted in the man's cart, then accuses him of theft and condemns him to death. About to see her husband beheaded, Sujata cries out that there are no gods in heaven, a challenge that heats up the throne of Sakka (Indra), King of Gods. He swoops down and exchanges the householder's body with that of the king's on the elephant. When the king is executed, Sakka explains his swift justice and crowns Sujata and her husband.

Any play with a "wise lady," even when the word "lady" was banned by the junta, inevitably evokes Aung San Suu Kyi. This drama also clearly referred to the upcoming 2015 elections when people hoped "the lady" would move against the evil powerful king (the junta and its cronies) to save her husband (Myanmar). And rather than the deus ex machina appearance of Sakka, the people's democratically determined choice would reverse the positions of the good and the bad . . . or almost. As Zaganar and many others still fear, however, the generals will just move out of sight, continuing to exploit the country's natural and human resources, while the NLD is left to deal with the problems on an empty budget.

Festival Transitions Provide More Public and International Interaction

Beyond Pressure's 2014 Performance Art Festival took place in People's Park, a popular weekend spot near the Shwedagon Pagoda. Founded by Moe Satt in 2008, that premiere event faced closure by censors but managed to become the first nongovernment festival staged openly in a public space with both local and foreign performers, albeit in a smaller, much less frequented park. Performance art is usually presented in art galleries, and avant-garde artists perform on the international grounds of foreign cultural centers where, although the offerings are free and open, they cannot attract the casual passerby or members of the public wary of government surveillance. In 2014, the two-day Beyond Pressure event took advantage of the relaxation of the rules against public gathering of more than five people to extend the reach of contemporary art into everyday life. It went to where people already hung out—such as holding symposia on art in the small teashops. In addition, it launched a video depicting various works of contemporary art on the video monitor of the number 48 bus, replacing the commercial soap operas and karaoke usually played. Beyond Pressure is in the vanguard of bringing contemporary art and performance into the public space through its willingness to negotiate (constantly) with officials. The 2014 festival featured mostly local and regional par-

ticipants with fewer artists from Europe but new artists from Benin and Afghanistan.

Also initiated in 2008 was the biannual iUi (initiating, updating, integrating) International Festival of Contemporary Performance. Founded by the Theatre of the Disturbed's Nyan Lin Htet and Lorène Tamain, the festival also broke new ground with free, more fully developed performances for the public, but continued the practice of setting up on the grounds of a foreign cultural center, the French Institute. In 2014, iUi 3.0, Performing Transition, Imagining the Future, focused on artists striving to offer new angles on how to view history and performance, addressing memory while mapping the current transition. In previous years it had offered performance workshops, its main draw being the rare opportunity for on-the-spot interaction between foreign and local participants, but in 2014, it concentrated on the importance of the moment in national affairs.

International Marionette Festival in Mandalay

Myanmar's first International Marionette Drama Troupe Festival took place in Mandalay in April 2016. Sponsored by the Swiss and German cultural agencies and the Myanmar Marionette Association, it allowed the public to attend free of charge. Aimed at reviving Myanmar puppetry, it proposed to work toward synthesizing the various regional styles within the country (Ye Dway 2016). It also promoted more collaboration between local and foreign artists by providing the first opportunity for the twenty-five students from the University of Culture to attend two-week workshops with local masters and Thai and Indonesian artists. Several Myanmar marionette manipulators have previously worked with visiting foreign puppeteers to create new works, but they have yet to develop modern pieces on their own and seem particularly resistant to narrative innovation, being overly protective of what they call "tradition."

In fact, the virtuoso demonstration of hand skills and the rather boringly repetitive "dances" that the puppet manipulators do today are *not* traditional, for when the marionettes were at their zenith of popularity and artistic esteem at the end of the nineteenth century, it was the vocalists, not the manipulators, who were the stars of the show. They told the stories and impersonated the characters, the *minthamee* (princess) vocalist being the prima donna of the troupe (Singer 1992: 40–41). During the last half century, through lack of training and the imposition of censorship, the storytelling vocalists have disappeared, and there is little incentive to develop new narratives, despite the wealth of local stories. So while nonverbal excerpts provide income from tourist performances, they have little to attract local audiences.

Even the minimal appearance of the pageboy in TKT's *King Lear* drew the ire of some puppet troupe leaders for its irreverent use of the marionette. These "traditionalists" feel threatened by the scope and pace of change beyond their control even when they are given demonstrations of the vitality and continuity of traditions in other cultures, such as Yogyakarta-based Paper Moon's *Mwathirika*, which premiered in 2010 and has been touring the world.[15] Featured at the Mandalay festival and then performed in Yangon, the wordless play explores a child's view of Indonesia's 1965 massacre of "communists."

Mwathirika embeds its tragedy in three charismatic children whom one comes to know and care about before the incomprehensible horror of sudden arrest and disappearance occurs. Unlike Antigone—whom Western spectators know primarily from the Sophocles text, but for a Burmese audience, she is rather an anonymous female figure for whom sympathy needs to be built up—the *Mwathirika* children are first established as endearing individuals. They play with their toys and each other, each manipulated by a single puppeteer sitting on a moveable stool. When a red triangle mysteriously appears on one house, the father is taken away by soldiers whose disguise resembles a cross between a gas mask and the "beak" worn by plague doctors during the Black Death. The brother and sister struggle to survive without their parent, catching frogs to eat. When the elder brother goes to the jail to inquire after his father, the whistle he uses to communicate with his sister gets him into trouble because of its color, red. When he does not return home, the distraught little girl blows her whistle to recall him, but her breath grows weaker and weaker. Their wheelchair-bound neighbor tries to comfort her with a music box, but is drawn away by her frightened father. When she comes again, the little girl is gone and only the music box is left. In the final scene, only the toppled wheelchair with its wheels spinning is on stage.

This was very effective theatre—the three children were differentiated personalities, yet their pain and bewilderment depicted a generic situation around the world. Using no words but the children's names, the evocative faces were handled with exquisite sensitivity by the puppeteers to express the nuance of emotion. The childlike quality was heightened by the manipulators' own tender expressions toward the puppets as they handled them. They showed the children's simple pleasures in the beginning with clear and amusing detail and likewise their stoicism and fear in an atmosphere which they do not, and cannot, understand. *Mwathrika* pulled together numerous theatrical elements—projections, masks, different types of puppets, and mime—to make art that specifically questions the legacy of the 1965 massacre but easily applies to the terror of military tyranny in any country. It is

not a play for children but one that depicts oppression through the eyes of children as uncomprehending victims. It impressed and moved Burmese spectators, providing an excellent template of how Myanmar artists could begin to aesthetically digest the country's fifty-five-year experience with martial law.[16] Perhaps the marionette students from the University of Culture gained insight into the potential of puppet theatre that they had not seen or imagined before.

A Walk into the Past

While Pongstaphone contends that there is still very little contemporary theatre in Myanmar, such as one understands the term in Western or some other Southeast Asian capitals, there is, nonetheless a lot of performance. Likewise, since 2011, along with undeniably more freedom to express one's mind and more opportunity to ameliorate one's material life, there is also trepidation about the behind-the-scenes performance of the generals and what actual improvements Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD can really bring about before widespread disenchantment sets in. One day during Thingyan, young people gathered at Mahabandoola Park in the Yangon city center for Splash Walk. This was advertised in the newspaper as an activity foregoing the pickup trucks and *pandals,* and just walking to relive the hide-and-seek, splash-and-dash fun of childhood in the neighborhood lanes. It proposed that after the walk, the participants help clean up the plastic rubbish in the park (Paing 2016). The organizers expected only a few walkers to show up, but a huge crowd amassed of people born after 1988, whose presence suggested that despite auspicious future prospects, they were already feeling a precipitous nostalgia for the "good old" bad days.

NOTES

1. The Burmese use of cover songs has had both positive and negative effects on the development of modern popular music. The artists' and the public's attitudes toward them are changing (Ferguson 2015). Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, some modern *pya zat* were performed in permanent theatres, and Myanmar was building up a repertoire of original plays. Especially well known were the dramas by Myodaw Maung Yin Aung at the Capital Theatre in Mandalay. The uprising in 1988 closed down the theatres.

2. Race and religion are frequently conflated in the confrontations. "Rohingya" is a relatively new term for Bengali Muslims, but not all Myanmar's Muslims are Rohingya, and both groups identify themselves separately. This has led to the confusion of just how long the Rohingya have been in Myanmar, as Muslims came in the fifteenth century, but the majority of Rohingya were not thought to have arrived until after British rule in the nineteenth

century. The East India Company encouraged migration between Arakan and Bengal so that while Bengalis came in increasingly large numbers to Arakan cities, at the same time thousands of Rakhine people went to Bengal (Wantanasombut 2012: 3–4).

3. The Myanmar government has moved to eliminate the name "Rohingya" and officially refers to them as "Bengalis" to emphasize their foreign origins. The majority of Muslims are addressed as *kala*, which means "black" in Hindi. Many of the *kala*s in Myanmar, however, are Buddhists. Nevertheless, they often face discrimination based on race rather than religion. In national television broadcasting, movie dramas, and in the live satirical presentations—*anyeint pwe*—they are referred to as *kala* or *kala mah* to make fun of their physical appearance (Thang 2015: 4).

4. There are many conspiracy theories that hardliners fabricated accusations of child molestation and rape to justify attacking each others' communities. Some have alleged that the Buddhist-Muslim problems were stage managed to divert people's attention from other more threatening actions—land grabs, multinational takeovers, the 2015 election, and constitutional change.

5. Zaganar was jailed for organizing relief for Nargis victims in 2008 and criticizing the government for its inaction. Ko Thila Min was also among the many artists who took supplies to the off-limits area.

6. Cotterill previously gave a solo performance, *UntitledLEAR,* under Pongstaphone's direction at the 2010 iUi 2.0 Festival in which he performed the daughters and other characters with finger puppets. Burmese students assisted by dousing Lear with water in the storm—in the manner of Thingyan—and provided other Burmese political contexts for the soliloquies.

7. Despite such efforts of goodwill, none of the political parties participating in the 2015 elections included Muslim candidates. In Yangon, the many religions and ethnicities appear to live side by side peacefully.

8. Thant Myint-U, grandson of the Burmese United Nations president U Thant, says Zaganar played an important psychological role. "Beginning in 1988, when people were looking for political leadership, he was one of those who came out of the film industry and filled this enormous void. . . . He was incredibly popular and not just among the anti-military crowd, but among ordinary people and even among the military themselves" (Pilling 2014).

9. Catholics are estimated at some 500,000, which is less than 1 percent of the total 50.5 million population, but include members of many ethnicities (Gonsalves 2014).

10. The arrival of the first Catholics who remained in Myanmar was in 1510, but the political situation in 2010 did not allow for an anniversary celebration (Gonsalves 2014).

11. According to Freddy Lynn (2016), Cardinal Po wrote a play about Maximilian Kolbe, and in light of the fact that Pope Francis recently made this Polish martyr a saint, he has encouraged CCAA to consider performing it.

12. Probably the first Broadway-style musical in the country was in 2008 when Ko Thila Min collaborated with American Philip Howse to present *Rent* at the American Cultural Center.

13. The little-known story of the Portuguese in Myanmar is told in the novel *Cannon Soldiers of Burma* by James Myint Swe (2014).

14. It is likely the Christians are engaging in soft "theatre diplomacy" both to keep their own hopes up and to reach out to moderate Buddhists, for Persecution, the organization monitoring persecution of Catholics writes, "Despite the push by radical Buddhist monks to build pagodas (religious shrines) on church property, Burmese Christians are remaining faithful and passive. In a volatile situation, any sort of religious or ethnic conflict among the minority Christians and majority Buddhists would result in a regression of any progress made by the new government. Unfortunately due to the power of Buddhist organizations in Burma, the chance any action is taken by the government to rectify the situation is slim" (Persecution 2016).

15. Maria Tri Sulistyani and her husband, Iwan Effendi, founded the puppet company in 2006, shortly after the earthquake in Yogyakarta. At first, the group intended to provide art and theatre facilities for children in the affected area. However, inspired by a workshop with the German Figurentheater Wilde & Vogel and watching their Shakespeare adaptations *Midsummer Night's Dream: Reorganized* and *Exit: A Hamlet Fantasy* presented for an adult audience at the Jakarta International Puppetry Festival in November 2006, they soon began to develop their own artistic pieces for a wider, adult audience, fascinated by the possibilities of puppet theatre (Aberle 2014: 89). Thus, like many innovative groups in Asia, they were stimulated by an encounter with a foreign troupe. One hopes that as Myanmar opens up, more of this cross-cultural fertilization will occur to help artists express the country's own experiences and mitigate the current local versus foreign divide that the junta exacerbated for its own benefit.

16. Responses came mostly from middle-class students who would not likely go to the current pagoda festival *zat pwe* whose entertainments appeal to the less well educated (Paing Sett Hein 2016). Moreover, the show was neither difficult to understand nor avant-garde unlike many of the events performed by foreign artists that are sponsored by their home country cultural agencies. It spoke clearly to the mind and heart.

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