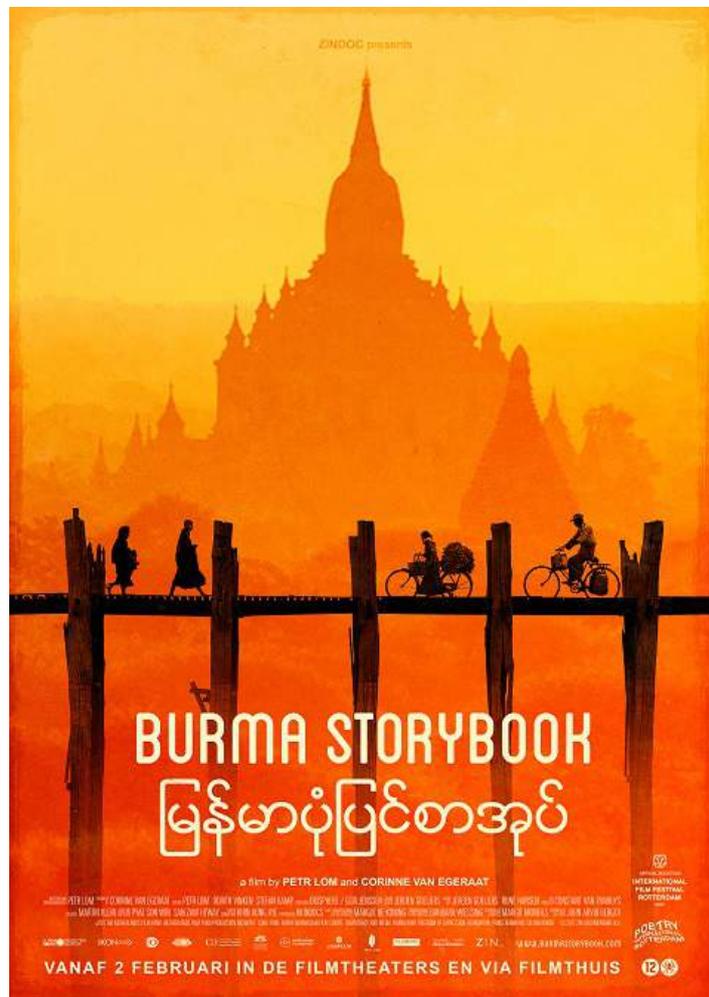


CINEMA CINE
delicatessen

IFFR 2017: Voices

BURMA STORYBOOK (world premiere)

A film by Petr Lom and Corinne van Egeraat



International publicity:
Silversalt PR
Thessa Mooij
+31.6.4151.5717
thessa@silversaltpr.com

Logline:

Burma Storybook is a creative documentary about a country emerging from years of dictatorship, told through Burmese poetry. The film circles around the story of the country's most famous dissident poet alive today, as he waits for his long-lost son to return home, having inspired fellow prisoners and younger generations to take up the pen.

Synopsis:

Poetry is the most popular art form in Myanmar: most people can recite a poem by heart, many write poems of their own, and with the recent introduction of the internet, there are more online poets than bloggers. Poetry has also helped Burmese people survive the dictatorship.

The film's main character is 70 year-old poet Maung Aung Pwint, who spent many years behind bars for his writing and activism. His family has been torn apart by the country's political history: by his own imprisonment and absence from his family, and by the two decade long political exile of his son to Finland. The yearning for his lost son, and his long awaited return home, form the backbone of the film.

Maung Aung Pwint's story is accompanied by a chorus of poems by the most famous poets in Myanmar today. They all raise a critical voice to the country's transformation, particularly attentive to enduring injustice.

This injustice is illustrated in a series of cinema verité scenes and stories – the storybook of the film – of the country's sudden economic and political transformation. A new world where rich young men drag race in downtown Yangon at night, racing past rickshaws and pedestrians for whom such wildly expensive cars are beyond their dreams in this poorest country in South East Asia. A new world that still leaves much past injustice intact: a former political prisoner counsels a cellmate who cannot stand the sound of rain because of its association with his past torture. A minority farmer expresses a persistent fear of the military, for “in Burma, the army is still king.”

In this brave new world of transformation and persistent injustice, the old poet, Maung Aung Pwint and his family becomes symbols of resilience and grace, an answer to the poet's question: “ how can our hearts be healed?”

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Petr Lom

I always make films about injustice. And so I had wanted to make a film in Myanmar for a long time – since at least the failed Saffron Revolution of 2008. But the dictatorship made filming there impossible. In 2012, when things were beginning to change, I was invited to show one of my film's in Myanmar's first ever Human Rights Film Festival. I found the experience extraordinary, the people in Myanmar wonderful – characterized above all by a curiosity and thirst to learn – and so I wanted to return. The festival invited my wife and I to come back and teach new film students how to make their first human rights short films. We accepted, and returned with the idea of also making a film of our own.

While reading about Myanmar before we came, my wife observed that many books remarked about the importance of poetry in Myanmar, and how widespread the craft was.

In Myanmar, when we started exploring the subject, this was confirmed: indeed, poetry is really in the lifeblood of all Burmese. In fact, the difficulty became that there are too many poets in the country - for almost everyone writes poetry, and many, many consider themselves to be poets. Hence the Burmese joke, that in Myanmar, “there are more poets than stray dogs.”

But how to turn poetry into a film? This question was answered when I met Maung Aung Pwint – Myanmar's most famous dissident poet, who had spent many years in prison for his activism. He was recommended to us by one of the founders of the Human Rights Film Festival – with the remark that I would like him very much when I'd meet him. This was an understatement. I was invited to his home, and as soon as I met him, I felt as if I had met a long lost friend. His deep penetrating gaze, his laughing eyes despite the sadness that often envelops him as an impenetrable fog. I knew immediately that I had found the main character for my film – something that usually in documentary filmmaking takes much longer, a process of trial and error, filming and watching footage, questioning my intuition, trying different things. Not this time.

Of course, we were blessed that Maung Aung Pwint opened up his heart and his household to us unconditionally, allowing us to film whenever and whatever we wished. Because of this we were able to film the heartrending intimate reunion of his family with his son that he had not seen for almost twenty years.

One of the first things Maung Aung Pwint told me was “let's make a long poem together.” This was his invitation to me as a filmmaker. And a challenge.

We have tried to do honor to his request by making a film that itself in structure and form is like a poem – a film that is as beautiful as the words to which it is dedicated.

To do this we chose not just to tell only the story of Maung Aung Pwint – though we could have chosen to do so, and the result would have undoubtedly been equally beautiful. But because the country is so rich, and because its time of transition is so important, we wanted

to make a film that would give more of a panoramic view of what the country is undergoing – and as well to show the ubiquity of poetry in it. That is why we chose to structure the film as a storybook: as a collection of cinema verite scenes all somehow linked to poetry, embedded within Maung Aung Pwint's own story.

And so our film is about many things. It is about poetry. It is about a beautiful country emerging from many years of suffering. But above all, it is about resilience – an inner strength that seems to transform itself into one of the most elusive things for a filmmaker to capture, one which you think is ordinarily invisible, and that is grace. That is the greatest gift that we have been given by Maung Aung Pwint.

FILMMAKERS

Petr Lom

Petr Lom was born in Prague in 1968, grew up in Canada, and is now based in The Netherlands with his Dutch wife Corinne van Egeraat. He received his Ph.D. in political philosophy from Harvard and was Associate Professor at George Soros' Central European University in human rights and philosophy. In 2003, he became an independent documentary director and producer specializing in human rights film. His award-winning films have been broadcast in over thirty countries and screened at more than two hundred and fifty film festivals around the world including Sundance and the Berlinale. His filmography: *Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan* (2004); *On a Tightrope* (2007), *Letters to the President* (2009); *Back to the Square* (2012), *ANA ANA ("I am me" in Arabic - 2013)*, and *Burma Storybook* (2017), for which he is also writing the accompanying book.

Corinne van Egeraat

Corinne van Egeraat (1966), Netherlands. An independent filmmaker and creative producer with a background in theatre, she specializes in projects on creative freedom of expression. In 2011-12 she produced the *Self-Portrait Video Project*, a year-long workshop on autobiographical storytelling with young Egyptian artists, which culminated with the collaborative feature documentary *ANA ANA ("I am me" in Arabic)* that was nominated for best film at IDFA 2014 and released in the cinemas in the Netherlands. She is currently producing *Framing the Transition*, a human rights photography essay project with twelve young Burmese photographers. Selected Netherlands filmmaker of the year in 2004, her filmography, all of which has been broadcast in the Netherlands, is: *Lord of the Jungle* (2000), *Cowboys in Kosovo* (2004), *Speeding on the Virtual Highway* (2007), *Bridging the Gap* (2008), *Dislocated* (2009), and *ANA ANA ("I am me" in Arabic - 2013)*. She is the producer of the about to be released feature documentary and book *Burma Storybook* (2017).

MAE YWAY



Young Mae Yway (26) came to poetry with a fierce DIY approach, after reading a poem in a magazine struck a nerve with her. She is available for interviews at IFFR 2017.

Wearing her tattoos and preferences for girls with pride, Mae Yway is the voice of young Burma, which is still in the middle of discovering itself. Originally Mae is from Myeik, a coastal city on the Andaman Sea, in Myanmar's far south.

Petr Lom and Corinne van Egeraat interviewed her about her inspiration to create poetry and her life in contemporary Myanmar.

When did you move to the capital, Yangon? My family moved when I was nine years old. I had culture shock. We were laughed at for how we spoke and our Myeik accent. I didn't dare talk to people except for two or three friends. I didn't dare speak in public: a feeling I have to this day. I'm afraid and shake all over when I recite my poetry in public.

When did you start writing poetry? As a teenager. When I read a poem in a magazine, I wanted to write one on my own. I didn't know you needed to study how to write. I just wrote down my emotions. But you can't just write something down. You need to create it. Poetry has to be composed, so it will be beautiful, artistic. And not just poetry – for example, cooking is also an art. When cooking and combining ingredients, this is also creation. It's also art. Creativity is essential. You should study every part of it. How does an onion taste if you add it to another ingredient? So, when you create a poem, you have to know other poems.

Did you study poetry at school? At school, we were taught art is something useless, what losers do: if you are inclined to art, you will starve. That was the message to young students. I wanted to write poetry, but none of my friends were interested in poetry. We studied poetry at school, but no one respected poetry.

And politics? The military government made young people indifferent to politics. Most of my friends, and most young people of our time, are still not interested in politics at all. Now with the new democratic government, the word "politics" has become popular, heard everywhere. Now some care about politics, some don't. It's a chaotic time.

Myanmar's political landscape is changing, but the country remains deeply conservative. You wear your resistance on your skin – covered in tattoos. It's what I wanted to do very much since childhood – I have liked tattoos since I was four or five years old. But I only had the courage to start tattooing in my twenties. Most people look badly on those who have tattoos. They look at me and think: what kind of girl am I? But I don't care about those who stare. Some people think I got my tattoos – and do other things – like drinking and smoking – to show I can do whatever men can. But I don't have gender differentiation in mind. I do it because I want to and like it. I will tattoo my entire body.

And you are looking for a similar freedom in your relationships? I'm neither lesbian nor straight: I'm human. I will have a relationship with whoever is okay with me, whether man or woman. Right now, I prefer girls. They are better at relationships. People around me say it's disgusting that I hang out with girls, telling me not to reverse nature. I ask them: what is nature? There is no nature. It is nonsense that men must like women because they are men; and women must like men because they are women. These are only man-made issues. You have the right to choose. If you are just following what others do, your life has no meaning. You have your own life, your own existence. You have to go with your own thinking. If not, go back to the military government.

What do you do for a living? I worked as an airline customer service agent for the last two years. I had a lot of responsibility, work pressure, taking care of passengers. When I came home, work was still in my head, dissatisfaction and anger too. I couldn't read and write. I became depressed. The only thing I could save during those two years was money. And blank paper. No poems. No thinking. I can't make a living from writing poetry. But I want to live with poetry, and improve my skills in writing. With no time and energy for poetry, it was worth it to give up my job. So I quit. I will find something else.

What place does poetry have in your life? Poetry is not the most important thing. But it's congruent with me. If I can't write poetry I will be depressed and lose hope to live. Poetry is me. It's inside me. So, as long as I exist, poetry will exist. If there is no me, there is no poetry.

A POEM BY MAE YWAY:

This Place

To say something to write down something about someone
Tearing asunder a cloud and peeping through, light blue
Dynamism, the sisterhood of a nest of sparrows

Hey, what's the noise? What's the commotion?
Why so sharp-tongued?
A look of solid disdain marks greeting at first sight
Oh, contemporary sisters, how eyes traverse from crown to toe
Reading into who you are who I am what you hold what I have in hand
LV Gucci hey, sisterbitch, you are UV, ha ha 34-24-36
So? Well-endowed? Ha! See my body and despair!
We are siliconed show what you have to get what you want

This is my ambition (says the young girl) this is my oversea journey pastoral
You gonna sit beside the driver's seat in a racing car? You gonna drive the car?
Sisters born of the same mother
Will you comb my hair in front of the dressing table?
Pull every hair out? Sisters in the house of Cinderella

Cinderella, pleadingly, says
We have to act in character according to the script
In real life, we are buddies hanging out together
More loving than real sisters
Hey, don't imitate us you young girls
Sleeping Beauty pretends to be asleep
Only to entice Prince Charming for his kiss
Unable to wait any minute longer for Shrek
Fiona goes down the tower
A queen ruling over ogres
Wasting time in the parliament.
Since the time of the Bagan era
Men and women have gained equal rights to gossip
Jealously and envy, too, reported as a common disorder among
The males of the royal family.
In chauvinist discourse,
Easy girls have to pretend disdain
From era to era inherited behavior
When excavated
Call it 'having an affair', call it 'keeping a mistress'
You gonna step and stomp on every spat-out gum?
You gonna keep sucking on (t)his damn lollypop?

Mae Yway
Translated by Zeyar Lynn

PORTRAITS

Internationally renowned photographer Dana Lixenberg created a series of portraits of the poets featured in BURMA STORYBOOK, which will be released as a book in June to coincide with an exhibition of the series as part of the Poetry International festival in Rotterdam. A maximum of three portraits are available for press coverage of the film with photo credits to Dana Lixenberg.

Please contact Thessa Mooij (thessa@silversaltpr.com) for any of these portraits.



STILLS

The following film stills and behind-the-scenes photos are available for press use.

Please contact Thessa Mooij (thessa@silversaltpr.com) for high-res versions.



TECH SPECS + CREDITS

2017, DCP, color, 81 minutes, world premiere IFFR 2017

A film by Petr Lom and Corinne van Egeraat

Director: Petr Lom

Producer: Corinne van Egeraat

DoP: Petr Lom

Editors: Petr Lom, Dorith Vinken, Stefan Kamp

Music: Biosphere/Geir Jenssen

Coproducers: IKONdocs and JAB Films Norway

Funding: Netherlands Film Fund, Production Incentive Netherlands Film Fund, CoBoFonds, IKONdocs/EO, Stichting Democratie en Media, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, Freedom of Expression Foundation Norway, North Norwegian Filmfund.

IFFR 2017 SCREENINGS

P+I: Jan 27, 9:00 at Cinerama 4

P+I: Feb 2, 8:00 at Pathé 5

World premiere: Jan 27, 20:00 at Pathé 7

Public screenings: Jan 28, 13:30 at Kino 1

Feb 1, 14:30 at De Doelen Jurriaanse Zaal