

A Life on the Road – The Thunderbirds

By Virginie Noel

A hushed murmur floats through the makeshift bamboo hall; the crowd is excited in that subdued Asian way. Whole families have bought their tickets and taken their seats for a once-a-year, eagerly awaited performance. Children's eyes sparkle with anticipation when a female voice announces the start of the show. The music starts, the red curtain lifts and the first star of the night appears on stage. She is beautiful. Tall, slim, elegantly dressed and perfectly made up, she lip-synchs to a popular Burmese song while her hips sway from side to side. The audience is captivated by her beauty... but she is no ordinary woman.

She is part of a group of transsexual itinerant performers. The Thunderbirds have been performing around Myanmar since 1968, going north during rainy season and south in the dry. Their fame extends across the country and they are an eagerly awaited part of pagoda festivals that are held around the country's provinces.

The leader of the group is known as David and he – now she – founded it 40 years ago. "I am the oldest and the dancers see me as their mother. I take care of them, we are like a family," says the son of a Christian mother and Buddhist father. She founded the group when she was 20 years old and though she considers herself a woman, she has kept her male Christian name.

The younger dancers go to her for advice and comfort and show the deep respect traditionally due to their elders. She teaches them make-up, dance, and performance and together they prepare new shows and choreographic routines. Her decades on the road do not seem to have taken a toll on her spirit, rather the life seems to fulfill her.

She created the group out of necessity. As a young transsexual growing up in 1960's Myanmar, she chose to live life on her own terms. Although not rejected by society, neither was she accepted. This lack of recognition of a transsexual's situation makes for a precarious life and limited job options. Being part of a marginalised minority, performing is one of the few things society allows them to do with dignity.

Over the years, though, The Thunderbirds' success and popularity have been growing along with the number of its members. Now a troupe of 12 dancers, they are supported by three male performers, a transsexual announcer, and a crew of male stage builders, electricians, technicians and lovers.

Eindra, the youngest member of the group, has just turned 19 and is already a confident, breathtakingly beautiful performer. Her looks, though, come at a high cost. She takes medication to enhance her femininity and suffers serious side effects such as weakness, dizziness and mild depression. But being “more of a woman is worth the sacrifice” she says. Sex-change operations are not available in Myanmar and going abroad is often simply not an option. Therefore most of the troupe resort to medication or tricks such as bum and bra-pads to enhance their feminine shapes. Those who have hormonally enhanced breasts proudly show them off in deep cleavages, helped by push-up bras. Happily indulging in their passion for glamour and beautiful clothes, they spend many hours applying make-up, trying out different dresses and creating new costumes.

They mostly perform twice a night, more on special days such as on independence day, when they might give five performances. Their shows include comedy, lip-sync performances of modern pop songs and traditional Burmese and modern dancing. Some of the performers revere western pop stars and constantly strive to look and dance like them.

Tickets for the two-hour-long shows cost about 50c per person because, David says: “I want everyone to be able to see our show.” Profits are shared between the troupe on an ascending scale according to experience and seniority. Performers often receive tips from the audience, who give the money graciously into their hands or climb on stage and slip the money, less graciously, into the performer’s cleavage or pants.

Their private lives are, however, reclusive and the backstage dressing room is where they live, eat, and sleep. Their living quarters are reminiscent of old-time circuses where limited space is used to maximum capacity. Usually each performer’s dressing room is only separated from her neighbor by a curtain of colorful fabric. The rooms are small, only large enough for a sleeping mat and a few personal possessions.

At each new location Eindra, like the others, sets out to turn her dressing room into a home with images of Buddha and a small offering table. She then tacks photos of admired performers and loved ones to the bamboo wall before arranging her make-up and hanging up some of the clothes she will need for the show. All her possessions fit into two metal crates, filled with clothes, make-up, accessories, small presents from fans, sleeping mats, blankets, and eating utensils. She shares a small boiler, rice cooker, and a fan with a couple of friends.

Although quarrels within the troupe occur, they are usually quickly resolved by bouts of laughter and good-natured banter, even though they tease each other mercilessly. Their relative lack of material comforts is largely made up for in friendship and the freedom of

being able to express their true identities. Growing up, they have been cheated twice – once by the cruel act of nature in assigning them a body of the wrong gender, and then by society, which does not accept them for what they are. “I used to feel very lonely when I was younger. I didn’t know there were others who were like me. But then one day I saw The Thunderbirds,” says Eindra, who vividly remembers the butterflies in her stomach as she talked to David for the first time: “I was so nervous, I went to see the show three times before I worked up the courage to ask if I could join.” It is not unusual for the troupe to accumulate new members from villages where they perform.

As performers they fulfill an accepted role in Burmese society and earn a lot of admiration for their beauty and performing talent. As individuals they find a family, friends and, sometimes, love.