

Sweet laughter heals children

The laughter of delighted children resounded across the normally silent pagoda, breaking down all the borders that humans erect — supposedly to protect and preserve, but often causing fear and ignorance. It was a welcome case of “laughter without borders”, and it was made possible by the organization Clowns Without Borders (CWB).

“I am Bolero,” said Gauthier Jansen, a clown from Belgium, holding one of Cambodia’s ubiquitous plastic bags made on the spot into an endearing puppet at the performance in front of about 80 children. “A plastic bag is something you can find all over the world. It takes one second to be built, but 100 years to be broken down,” Jansen said at a Feb 10 performance at Sweet Mango Pagoda (Wat Svay Phaem) in Kandal province. The show was sponsored by and took place at local NGO the Mango Tree Garden (MTG), which “offers a place of healing to all children”. Visible from the pagoda gates and this scene of unrepressed joy was another face of Cambodia: the Khmer Rouge Tribunal where five top ex-Khmer Rouge leaders are being held on charges of crimes against humanity.

In keeping with MTG’s nature-friendly philosophy 28-year-old Jansen’s one-man performance was strongly environmental: “Wherever there is a plastic bag on the planet, this is a place where a tree — like a Mango Tree — will never grow up,” said Jansen after his performance. “This plastic disturbs the planet, but you just need your imagination and you can build a puppet or a musical instrument...The plastic bag is my performance.”

Jansen masterly side-splitting performance riveted underprivileged children for close to two hours. He used gags and bodily gestures that seemed to ring a universal note, glued together by a unique language of primordial sounds slyly reminiscent of French, Khmer and monkeys.

“I’ve never seen anything like him before,” said 10-year-old San Srey Peut. “I like barang [foreign] clowns even more than Khmer clowns.”

This tour, Jansen’s sixth international one for CWB, has also seen him in India, Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand and Burma, where he “sneaked over the border” to bring his laughter to the children. In Cambodia he has even performed for AIDS patients still in their beds inside some of the Kingdom’s pediatric hospitals. “In the evening after the show you just don’t know what to do with all the smiles you have got. Laughter is the shortest distance between borders,” said Jansen, who hopes to create a CWB branch in Cambodia in the next couple of years.

MTG is a unique children’s NGO, using an alternative approach to trauma

healing through “creative play” and the imagination. Although there is plenty of trauma in Cambodia, the trauma is not emphasized, so that the strength and originality of the child is “rediscovered” through cultural and natural resources.



Bolero from Clowns Without Borders, Belgium casts his spell over children from the Mango Tree Garden, using only plastic bags.

“I don’t believe many children are actually traumatized; they can more easily overcome trauma than adults,” said Bowinneth Phem, who was inspired to found MTG in 2005, after seeing Canadian Paul Hogan’s therapeutic work with children in the war-torn Tamil area of Sri Lanka. She moved back to Cambodia five years ago after having been brought up in Holland, where she trained as a psychologist.

“I was very inspired but I didn’t have the courage,” she said. “Then one day I was looking for a [particular] monk and I ended up here in this particular pagoda. I had a vision, and two months later I started it.”

Today altogether about 100 children from the surrounding villages come on Sunday mornings to the free MTG sessions. “It’s very casual; sometimes the kids have to work. Usually about 30 come,” said Bowinneth Phem. MTG allows all children to attend, regardless of whether they have any trauma or not. In the near future MTG plans to work with children with AIDS, disabilities, and who have been sexually and physically abused, in conjunction with other organizations.

MTG uses a range of activities or “play” including story-telling, meditation, tree-planting rituals, building, drawing and games to allow children to keep experiencing their creativity so they “can dream and hope for the future”.

“When we are traumatized there are images that we relive again and again,” said Bowinneth Phem, who said this is often caused by “trans-generational” trauma. “With play and creativity you can work with these images. Sometimes here we talk

about the children’s dreams or nightmares through story telling. It helps if you deal with it in a playful, creative way, so they get out of the vicious circle so they can dream again. The trauma becomes a dream, which becomes a vision for life.”

er-beginning, like a tree,” Bowinneth Phem said. “One story leads to another story, and they change over time. They are stimulated to imagine and create by these stories.”

All the seven “animators” (assistants) also take part in the story-telling. They often prepare for this with a spontaneous improvisatory painting called “mystery painting”, “because most adults have lost their connection with their imagination and originality — their playfulness,” she said. “Actually it’s the adults who are traumatized. Children are still in their development, so they are quite resilient.”

Wat Svay Phaem is an especially peaceful venue and the sacredness of the place plays a special role in MTG.

“I don’t think there is another place like this in a pagoda in Cambodia,” she said. “I don’t think the monks would allow it. But here even the head monk participates, leading the meditation or tree planting ceremonies. They respect the children.”

And what do energetic and mischievous village kids think of these solemn esoteric activities usually reserved for the pursuit of enlightenment?

“At first it was strange but now it’s so normal,” said 11-year-old Choen Davin. “I feel my mind is clear.”

Dan Poynton

Story-telling is MTG’s most important tool and every Sunday there is a big story-telling session, often done in the context of nature or some animal that is lurking around the pagoda.

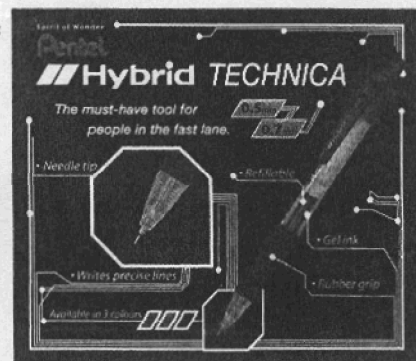
“Everything at MTG is based on stories; they are never-ending and nev-

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