

RIDING INTO THE FUTURE

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life in the shadows

Simon N. Ostheimer uncovers the story behind southern Thailand's most-loved art form – shadow puppetry

For Thai artist Apinan Sarochwong, the ancient art of shadow plays is a fading tradition, but one he is determined to preserve. Originally from Surat Thani, Sarochwong has long been based in Phuket, where he makes a living as a painter and part-time puppeteer.

A traditional art form that can be found throughout Asia, including styles indigenous to Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and India, shadow plays have been performed around Thailand since the early 15th century and were long the favoured form of entertainment for royalty. The shows feature leather puppets, which are displayed behind a large, backlit white screen, accompanied by music played by a band. Their popularity quickly spread to villages throughout the

kingdom, with ornate puppets used to tell stories based on the Hindu epic poem *Ramayana*. However, while the rest of the country adopted a style known as *nang yai*, southern Thailand developed its own distinctive version called *nang talung* (the name comes from Phatthalung, the province where it is believed to have originated).

While the former style uses huge puppets weighing up to 4kg each (the word *yai* means "big" in Thai), *nang talung* uses smaller puppets and takes a much more down-to-earth approach,

using comedy, music and scripts written in the southern dialect to put on plays designed to entertain audiences – put simply, it's an art form for the people.

Sarochwong is based in the Phuket Art Village, a bohemian enclave on the far south of the island and home to a changing roster of artists, ►



The puppets represent gods, heroes, demons and a comedian

with galleries (in many cases built by the artists themselves) surrounding a shady central courtyard. In the midst of this chaotic creative space is Sarochwong's studio, which features a downstairs gallery where he exhibits his abstract paintings and an open loft from which he holds regular performances of nang talung.

Tucked away inside his studio, he stores his dozen or so shadow puppets, each measuring 30-50cm high, in a large folder made from rattan. The beautiful figures are handmade by skilled southern Thai craftsmen from cured water buffalo or cow hide, and coloured by food dyes, with the hues showing brightly when backlit on the screen. They have a movable, articulated arm controlled by string, which allows for limited action.

In keeping with custom, Sarochwong is the sole puppeteer (known in Thai as the *nai nang talung*) in his shows, made all the more remarkable when performances can go on for five hours. For



larger showcases, he's accompanied by a troupe of musicians, who play the *pi* (oboe), *ching* (cymbals), *taphon* (drum), *glong* (drums), *krap* (wooden blocks) and *mong* (gong).

The puppets all represent distinctive characters, including gods, heroes, demons and a comedian. The latter is by far the most popular puppet, a kind of jester who dispenses wisecracks that can touch upon politics, daily life and local gossip. Sarochwong writes his own plays, poetry and dialogue, which is spoken and sung in the southern Thai dialect.

While nang talung was once the island's main form of entertainment, Sarochwong is now called upon to perform only at heritage festivals or annual temple fairs. It means that he performs mainly for the love of the art form and the hope that, by keeping it in the public eye, this most magical and entertaining of southern Thai traditions will be kept alive for generations to come. 🎭

GET CREATIVE

APINAN SAROCHWONG IS AVAILABLE FOR NANG TALUNG WORKSHOPS AT THE OASIS ED. PHUKET CREATIVE CENTRE LOCATED IN PHUKET'S SOUTHERN RAWAI DISTRICT. VISIT OASISEDPHUKET.COM FOR MORE INFORMATION. THE PHUKET ART VILLAGE IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC AND IS LOCATED AT 28/68 SOI NAYA 2 IN RAWAI.

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