

Thai Journal (Volume 18) – That's Entertainment

Lights, Camera, Frustration

Plaza Lagoon, it seems, is quite a popular location for movies. We were watching one of the mini-series presentations on TV not long ago and there was the familiar bridge and store backdrop. Then last week, there was a crew in to shoot some advertising photos using various Plaza Lagoon backgrounds.

Then yesterday a movie crew showed up and I was ready. My hair had been getting a bit long and Cindy thought that I might be becoming a hippie or something and so she offered to trim it. I had been refusing up until this time. She had once cut my hair several eons ago and it didn't turn out too well. It turned out being one of those escalation jobs. You know, you start up on, say, the right side of the head, and then you try to even it up on the other, only to have to come back and even it up again on the right side. On and on it goes until eventually you look like all of the Three Stooges, first Larry, then Moe and finally Curly.

But I finally relented and she did a little trim around the back and sides. Not too bad, actually. So I was ready. My signature black jeans were fresh out of the wash and so I put them on. Unfortunately my favorite shirt was at the other house, so I had to do the best that I could. I asked Cindy how I looked and she said, "You'd probably make a better impression if you zipped up your pants." Everyone's a critic! But the true artist takes it in stride.

I rushed out to where they were filming inside the video store. To add some additional coolness, I had my iPod with me. I positioned myself on the curb just across from the video store and waited to be discovered. Then as if out of a fog, someone came out of the door. It was the director, or perhaps a cameraman. This was it! Celebrity was within my grasp! I vowed at that time that I would not be affected by the fame, the fortune, the groupies - well, maybe the groupies - that I would continue to be the sweet, lovable, caring, person I have always been. When he reached me he said, "Grandpa, you're in my shot and you'll have to move. Grandpa! I was mortified; My movie debut had been quashed, at least for that day.



The next day another crew was filming in a different part of Plaza Lagoon. This time I made friends with the cameraman. That's him sitting on the dolly (right). He said this was an action film. A big ruckus was about to break out (below). So, I hung around the sidelines and took some pictures. He suggested that I might do better in a romantic role perhaps as a Cary Grant type role.



Most of the movie stars and some of the singers are what are known as “luk krueng”, literally half-breeds, meaning half Thai and half foreigner. Warren and Derek could fill those kinds of roles if they spoke Thai. Of course, neither of them have my rugged good looks.

A couple of days ago, they were at it again. This time they were filming a commercial. As I was chatting with various people during the filming, one guy from T-Dome Models asked me if I was interested in doing some modeling. He said they are always looking for foreign models. Am I interest? Am I interested? I think he's looking for walk-ons or people who can be in background. So he took a picture of me, and I gave him contact information. This could be it, baby! Actually I wouldn't mind doing this a couple of times just for the fun of it and for your amusement, of course. It actually looks quite boring with people waiting



around a lot. I think the reason the director shots “Action!” is because there is so little action most of the time.

I have long been interested in film making and TV production. The cameraman is carrying quite a load. The harness supports the camera, which doesn't rest on his shoulder but is suspended slightly above it on that arm. During breaks in taping, he would sit on a chair and an assistant would actually support the camera so the weight was not even on the harness. They did

have a tripod, but seemed to prefer the mobility of the hand held camera.



One of the nice things about video as opposed to film is instant feedback. That little medal case, which is open, contains the video tape recorder/player and a small screen LDC display. The director can watch the scene as it is progressing, but can replay it immediately after it has been completed. This way he knows if the scene is right. I think he did several takes even though one might have looked good upon first examination. That's prudent given you don't want to have to bring back the entire cast and crew another day because something wasn't right. Video tape, after all is cheap.



In addition to the cast and crew, the ad staff is in tow. They are perched just out of camera range with their own monitor. They check the story board and keep an eye out for the little things, such as continuity issues, which might otherwise slip by.

The Vast Wasteland

"Don't you wish there were a knob on the TV to turn up the intelligence? There's one marked 'Brightness,' but it doesn't work."

- Gallagher

I've had a chance to view the cable offering available here and initially I wasn't very impressed. All the cable channels come via satellite. We didn't have either HBO or Cinemax in the US, but I was surprised at some of the offerings. They are older than the hills. They are still showing Fatal Attraction. There's another movie channel, Star Movie, which is a Rupert Murdoch channel from Hong Kong. They are mostly action films, but at least they are more recent.

There are a couple of channels for series programs such as CSI, Law and Order, Cold Case, Lost, The Amazing Race, Desperate Housewives, Survivor, 24 and the Apprentice. The only trouble is that they are about a season behind. Most of the non movie channel are dubbed in Thai, but there is a device on the set top box, an A/B switch, which lets you listen in English.

The big, monster program over here is something called "Academy Fantasia" which is kind of a cross between American Idol and Big Brother. The person each week who receives the lowest number of call-in votes is eliminated. There are, however, some aspects, which are different from American Idol, at least what I know of American Idol, because I have never watched an entire show and have only caught glimpses of it on occasion. Academy Fantasia has added very visible teachers to work with the contestants. I suppose there is something like this on American Idol as well, but it just isn't publicized.

Teachers have a very special place in Thai society. They receive a lot of respect, not a lot of money, but a lot of respect. So before the announcement is made about who received the lowest number of votes, each of the teachers, and this includes perhaps 8 or 10 people who work with the contestants on various aspects of song, dance, or acting, comment on how the group is doing as a whole. They are typically very encouraging.

Once the results are announced, the emphasis at this point is not on the winners, those who get to continue, but on the loser. There are a lot of embraces as the person with the lowest number of votes grabs their suitcase and says good-bye to the other contestants. The person makes the rounds of the teachers, who share embraces and parting words. There are smiles all around and one would be hard pressed to tell that this person has been eliminated amid his/her smiles, hands thrust into the air in what looks like victory. Indeed the only signs of sorrow are from those who get to go on to compete another day as they mourn the loss of a friend. This is all rather surreal. Maybe it has to do with not losing face.

It doesn't end there. Now is where we get to the Big Brother aspect. Throughout the week, virtually 24 hours a day, you can tune to another cable channel and see what's going on in the house where all the contestants are sequestered. They have no contact with the public and viewers can watch them interacting with one another or practicing with their teachers for the upcoming week's show. SMS messages crawl across the bottom of the screen as people comment on their favorites and the small number of votes cast during the week are tabulated and displayed as a graph for each contestant.

There are no commercials during the program, which runs almost three hours every Saturday night for twelve weeks. The money is made off the fees charged by those who call in to vote and the cell time it takes to vote. Cell phone usage, except for a small maintenance fee, is based on the amount of time used by the calling party, not on some set monthly charge. In addition only the calling party is charged. The call is free to the receiving party. One can vote as often and as many times as one wishes and I've heard stories of people who have run up close to \$100 in voting fees alone. So this is not so much a talent contest as a popularity contest.

The other thing worthy of note as far as entertainment on TV goes are what I

would call the Thai mini-series, which are nothing more than drawn out soap operas. Normally I wouldn't pay a lot of attention to them, as they run about two hours a night, two nights a week for a period of about two months. What makes them worthy of note is that they are well produced technically. The photography is excellent, there are always good locations, and the music is memorable. There was one series, which was set back in the 40's, which used authentic furniture, clothes, and automobiles from the period. Another was set in Switzerland. Likewise, the acting is first rate.

There are some recurring elements. The main plot usually revolves around some unprofessed love. It usually takes the entire series to get this straightened out. In a culture where politeness and avoiding confrontation are traditional values, this is understandable. There is a lot of arguing, but it's not over the main issue. Someone usually overhears something they did not know and this propels various plot twists. There's plenty of crying. In one episode this woman cried for virtually the entire two hours. That was a bit much. There are plenty of hospital scenes with life and death hanging in the balance. Finally there are long, thoughtful interludes when a person plays back in his/her mind what has happened while the camera focuses on his/her expression. Facial expressions and reaction shots make up a lot of the footage. Given that both the actors and actresses are very attractive, this is not hard to take.

Now that I have these pretty well figured out, I don't expect to watch all that much in the future. There was one, which was a little over the top, that I have stopped watching. The basic plot was that a young girl in her late teens was to travel from upcountry to join her mother in Bangkok. Before she left her mother told her not to talk to anyone during her journey. She would meet her at the railway station. Her mother was killed in an accident and didn't meet her at the station. She, nevertheless, continued to honor her mother's instructions and did not talk to anyone. When she wouldn't talk to anyone, people thought that she was deaf and dumb. A very handsome young man offered to take her in (perhaps this is what her mother was warning her about in the first place.) So for the rest of the series she is having to maintain this charade even as she is falling in love with her benefactor. I bailed on this one after two episodes.

Lumpini Park Entertainment Scene

Recently after Cindy's dental appointment in Bangkok we started walking back to the subway station to catch the train to Lard Prao. We passed Lumpini park in the process. On the other side of the street from Lumpini park is what is know as Suan Lum or the Lumpini Night Bazaar. This is a market and entertainment area. We heard a band playing and as we had not yet eaten supper, we decided to get something there and take in the show.

We were pleasantly surprised when we entered this mostly open air pavilion. There was a large stage up front, flanked by a food court on the left and a beverage court on the right. These food/refreshment courts ran the entire length



of the pavilion. We went ahead and bought 100 baht (\$2.50) worth of coupons each, found ourselves a table and then set off to hit the various food and beverage courts to make our selections.

The food was descent, the atmosphere lively and the entertainment pretty diverse with bands changing every 30 minutes or so. We hadn't planned on staying very long, but it was so pleasant that we lingered for probably an hour and a half, using the remainder of our coupons to buy some ice cream. When I passed this area on a subsequent Sunday morning on my way to church, which is nearby, I noticed that there was construction going on to increase the size of the pavilion by perhaps another 25%. Once again these folks have gotten it right by



providing a relaxing and entertaining venue for people to attend. This is not a bad place to spend a Friday or Saturday evening.