

PRESERVING THE HERITAGE AND CONTINUING THE TRADITIONS

By : Thin Pa Pa. (Shwe Amyutay Magazine)



Although we can say that traditions follow our genes it is also true that the basic is one's own inclination to excel in the chosen field. We need to combine diligent study, dedication and our talents to really excel and uphold the family traditions. We must strive to follow exactly in the footsteps of our elders and at the same time work for continuity of our family traditions. I was able to meet with a young girl who had done just that!

Marionette theatre involves the manipulation of the spider web of strings attached to the puppets and make them perform in time with the music. This is the art of

the puppet master: a human dancer must resemble the movements of a puppet and the puppets' movements must also resemble the dances of humans. This involves the skills and talents of the person manipulating the puppets. But the puppets in addition to imitating the human dance steps must also have appropriate dresses and costumes. This is also important.

Some puppets would be so exquisite in their costumes and dresses, reflecting the creation of their masters and creators. Cho Cho Sann, a young girl is one such person. She makes the wooden puppets come to life with her creations and dreams in their shiny dresses. She is the direct descendent of a long line of master puppeteers. Her grandfather was Nyaungdon U Ba Gyaw, a master puppeteer in his own time. Her father was U Sein Tun Kyi, also a master puppeteer, who had received many awards from the government for his marionette performances. Cho Cho Sann had worked together with her mother, since her adolescence, to create new and exquisite costumes for the puppets in their troupe, sewing in colourful and sparkling sequins to the dolls she loves so much.

Cho Cho Sann related her experiences when we met her. "By the 4th grade I was able to distinguish between a *taungshay pusoe* (a long traditional sarong used by male dancers) and a traditional sarong used by female dancers. But I was still too young to handle a puppet. They were heavy and my arms ached. I started learning about the marionettes when I was about 20 years old. There were many students from the Union Cultural University who visited our house for instructions and lessons. I was very envious of them and became very determined to follow in their path. As Cho Cho Sann was the youngest in the family, her parents did not pressure her but let her choose her own way in life. When young she had focused her creativity on designing new and beautiful costumes for the puppets but later also learnt the art of manipulating the marionettes. But as she said, it was not only envy that made her study the art of marionette theatre. She told us "When I was young, I wanted to learn everything. I studied with both my dad and mom. But my dad was not like my mom. He is so impatient. If I cannot learn what he is teaching he would scold me, even hit me sometimes. So I was more afraid of my father and slowly I drifted towards my mother and that is how I got this proficiency in creating the dresses for the puppets. But her desire to learn the art of manipulating the puppet could not be suppressed. Later she was able to overcome her fright towards her father and endured his temper and scoldings which led her to this present state.

Her father U Sein Tun Kyi was awarded the 1st Prize in marionette theatre category at the National Performing Arts Competition with his performance of the classical "Viduya" story. He also got gold and silver medals at the subsequent National Performing Arts Competitions with his rendering of such classic marionette plays as "The

Elephant King Sardan”, “Buridatta, the Naga King”, “Thwatithena” and “Thambulla”. It is really laudable that Cho Cho Sann had not only inherited her family’s traditions but also quite keen to keep alive the traditions of Myanmar marionette theatre.

It is true that without the inherent love of the arts it is impossible to accomplish anything despite the fact that one is quite familiar with the environment. Diligence and passion is the key to excel in one’s field and gain expertise. Cho Cho Sann did not learn the mastery of manipulation of the puppets the easy way. She had to devote four years to really master the art. She added, “Although I still cannot come up to my Dad’s level, I can now manipulate almost all the marionettes”. Cho Cho Sann is now quite proficient in handling the various movements of the male dancers, female dancers, the Naga(mythical serpents), the Royal Page Boy, the Court Maidens, flower bouquet, Zawgyi(mythical magic men supposed to be living in the forest) and ogres. Out of these various puppets, the Zawgyi figure is the most complicated and hard to manipulate but Cho Cho Sann had mastered it quite well now. But she says that she like the dances of the male and female dancers the best.

Now Cho Cho Sann had been with Htwe Oo Myanmar Marionette Troupe for 3 years. She had performed not only domestically but had also been abroad. She had been to Dubai, Sweden, Cambodia to present her skills. She is also trying to find new ways to modernize her work. “My dream is to become famous as my Dad. I had strived very hard to master this art of marionette theatre, I had combined not only hard work but also hard study, diligence, determination to get to my goal. My aim is also to inherit the arts of marionette theatre from my granddad and my dad ” she told us.

Cho Cho Sann not only strived to expertly manipulate the marionettes but also to have appropriate dresses and costumes for each and every scene. “It takes a long time to create a *taung shay* and *htamein*(traditional sarongs for the male and female dancers). You need to sew in sequins all around the cloth. They must really resemble the actual real-life *taung shays* and *htameins* used by human dancers. The materials may be easy to handle but care is needed. It might take about 2 days to finish one. The hardest is to decorate an ogre figure. The material is not soft or pliant. We have to use force to push in the needles and our fingertips really hurt after that. We need to use thimbles. And you must also be patient. It takes about one day to finish the decorations for an ogre figure. But as this is my love I forget about the pain and the hardships. And we do not only decorate our figures, we also fulfill external orders too. I try to steel myself, if I feel tired or discouraged, by reminding myself that it is my duty to preserve our traditions and our family heritage.” We were so touched by her as she related to us her feelings with tears in her eyes. Because of her health Cho Cho Sann had formal education only up to the 7th grade but with her determination she had studied her love of Myanmar marionette theatre for more than 10 years. She continued,”When I started learning the art of marionette theatre I had no idea where it would lead me. My only feeling was the love I have for these small dolls. Now I am trying hard to introduce our culture to the world with them. I am trying to innovate and create new dance moves too.

It is indeed a proud moment for her as slowly the world has become to appreciate Myanmar’s arts and culture. Also it is to our credit that a Myanmar lady is striving to get world recognition with her skills and talents. Cho Cho Sann competed in the 3rd National Performing Arts Competition in 2006 and was awarded with a bronze medal. She had also revealed that she welcomes all who are interested in Myanmar marionette theatre and determined to preserve the cultural heritage of Myanmar.

Cho Cho Sann had clearly demonstrated that with determination and conviction it is possible to overcome any hurdles and difficulties in one’s journey to mastery in any aspects of life.



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