



BLA, left, performs in a scene from the opera 'A Boy and a Tiger'.

The tigers break free

Documentary reveals the liberating experience of an opera performance by Thai children living with HIV

JIM POLLARD
THE NATION

About five or six years ago a remarkable transformation occurred at some of the saddest homes in Thailand. Orphans at special centres – in Chiang Mai, Lop Buri, Isaan, Bangkok, the South and all throughout the country – began to stop dying.

Children born with one of the worst diseases began to enjoy ordinary lives. Kids who were normally sickly and weak were no longer expected to die in their early teenage years. Some of them got strong enough to win school sports competitions.

The arrival of cheap, subsidised medicine for HIV brought sweeping changes to orphanages where babies and children had lived a wretched physical existence and died at predictable regular intervals.

The availability of anti-retroviral drugs helped to dramatically extend the lives of

children many Thais felt were cursed, or people who had committed great sin in a previous life.

MOVIE REVIEW

While the development of these drugs – ARVs, as they're often known – was the answer to many prayers, they changed the whole dynamic within orphanages and brought a new set of challenges for the people raising such children.

Perhaps the toughest of all of these dilemmas is preparing children for life in the big imperfect world outside the loving homes where many have been raised – how to cope with the fear, discrimination, rejection and bias many people with HIV/Aids encounter.

Musician Bruce Gaston sums up that dilemma superbly in a gut-wrenching new film when he says: "What do you do when your life has a great big tiger in it?"

"Living with the Tiger" is a true story about a group of children at an orphanage in Lop Buri, who Gaston meets and takes on a wonderful journey while teaching them music and getting them to perform in an opera. It's an event that aimed to uplift the young performers, as well as educate and entertain people in rural Thailand.

Gaston deserves a medal for his efforts, as does Englishman Mike Thomas, a former IT specialist who became a volunteer at Baan Gerda and started filming music lessons that Gaston, a Thai-speaking composer, gave to the children.

Thomas' documentary, which culminates in a public performance they gave in the far Northeast, includes moving scenes as it records two of the boys travelling home to reconnect with their relatives.



CHILDREN from Baan Gerda in a scene from the opera 'A Boy and a Tiger', performed at Khon Kaen in December 2009.

» READY TO ROAR

- "Living with the Tiger" shows at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand tonight at 8. Visit www.FCCThai.com.
- There will also be a screening at Patravadi Theatre at 8 on Thursday, with filmmaker Pop Areeya giving an introduction.
- Director Mike Thomas will attend both screenings.
- Entry is free, but reservations are necessary.
- Visit www.LivingWithTheTiger.com.

While there is a simple charm about

Gaston's dealings with these children, as they learn how to sing and play musical instruments, there are also some amazing scenes that quietly reveal the extraordinary sensitivities within their extended families.

For me, the stars of this film are Bla and Oy, two boys struggling to cope with family members who thought they would never see them again; youngsters who face daunting tests with a grace and bravery that belies their youth.

Bla, one of the oldest boys, is a gentle soul who recalls how his dad died hugging him, and how he began to realise that other members of his family weren't comfortable having him around. "I knew they were afraid of me."

Yet he yearns to get some of the land his father left, to learn to grow rice and build his own home. In auditions with Gaston, he jokes about having a voice that sounds like a pig giv-

ing birth. But his height and maturity help get him get a key role in the stage performance.

Oy seems a surprisingly joyful little bean somewhat taken aback when he finds relatives crying after he returns to see them in the Northeast. His aunts want him to come back and live with them, but he's "very happy at Baan Gerda" and wants to finish his education first.

We see the children regularly taking their medicine. And German Karl Morsbach tells how access to ARV drugs and help from a doctor who specialized in HIV brought dramatic changes to the home he set up 10 years ago.

"Our children became quite healthy .. so these children didn't die anymore. It changed everything at Baan Gerda. Now, all of a sudden these children have to be prepared for life."

Forget Hollywood, only real life can give you scripts like this. And as with real life, you don't know how it's going to turn out.

"Living with the Tiger" is actually the sec-

ond film about Baan Gerda after a German production several years ago called "Heaven's Meadow". But Thomas, now based in Phuket, has sought to focus on the positives without dwelling on the children's plight.

"Thailand did remarkable work to counter the Aids epidemic in the 1990s, but we're now in a different phase - dealing with the stigma - and nobody's really tackling this. I see no reason why this country can't lead the way again, in fighting this [discrimination]," he said.



Thomas

BLA AND OY at Baan Gerda.



COURTESY OF MIKE THOMAS

Most of the dialogue is in Thai with English subtitles, but this is a top-class production that captures a lot of the raw earthy appeal of Isaan. Thai audiences will enjoy and be moved by the characters in this – indeed it has such powerful important messages, it should be mandatory viewing.

The British Embassy is helping to fund public screenings of the film this week and it is well worth a look. At a time when Thailand is supposedly wracked with political division, I found it humbling and inspirational to see innocent teenagers who face a much grimmer fate, confront their futures so bravely. It puts a whole new perspective on the relatively minor 'problems' the rest of us have to deal with.