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Performing Resistance in Burma

Xan Colman and Tamara Searle

In Myanmar close eyes, close ears, everybody like prisoner. I have toothache I cannot eat, I cannot speak. Too much suffering toothache. I want to show the doctor, dentist. OK? I take a bus, I cross a border. Outside I look for a dentist.

"Oh doctor, you do me a favor, you check my teeth."

"Lu Maw, why you come here? Inside Burma, don't you have a doctor, don't you have a dentist?"

"Oh Doctor, we have many doctor, but everyone, we are not allowed to open . . . our . . . mouth."

—Lu Maw, "Number Two Moustache" (2007b)

The bloody civil protests of August and September 2007 and the cyclone of June 2008 delivered to the world yet more disturbing imagery of the beautiful and unique, but also tumultuous Burma. These two catastrophes captured the world's imagination and humanity, possessing, as they do, the scale of human tragedy that ignites sweeping global media coverage.[1]

Burma is a place of contradictions, both sublime and ridiculous. Its cars drive on the right, yet almost all have right-hand-drive steering wheels (designed for left-side driving); it is the subject of far-reaching sanctions from the United States (whose Western eyes it endeavors to shun), yet the US dollar is the de facto currency. As the events of 2007 and 2008 so starkly reminded us, Burma is also a place of harsh repression and systematic neglect. It fits the dictionary definition of an international

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[1] *Ed. note: The authors here choose to use "Burma" rather than "Myanmar." See also "A Delicate Balance: Negotiating Isolation and Globalization in the Burmese Performing Arts" by Catherine Diamond in this issue.*

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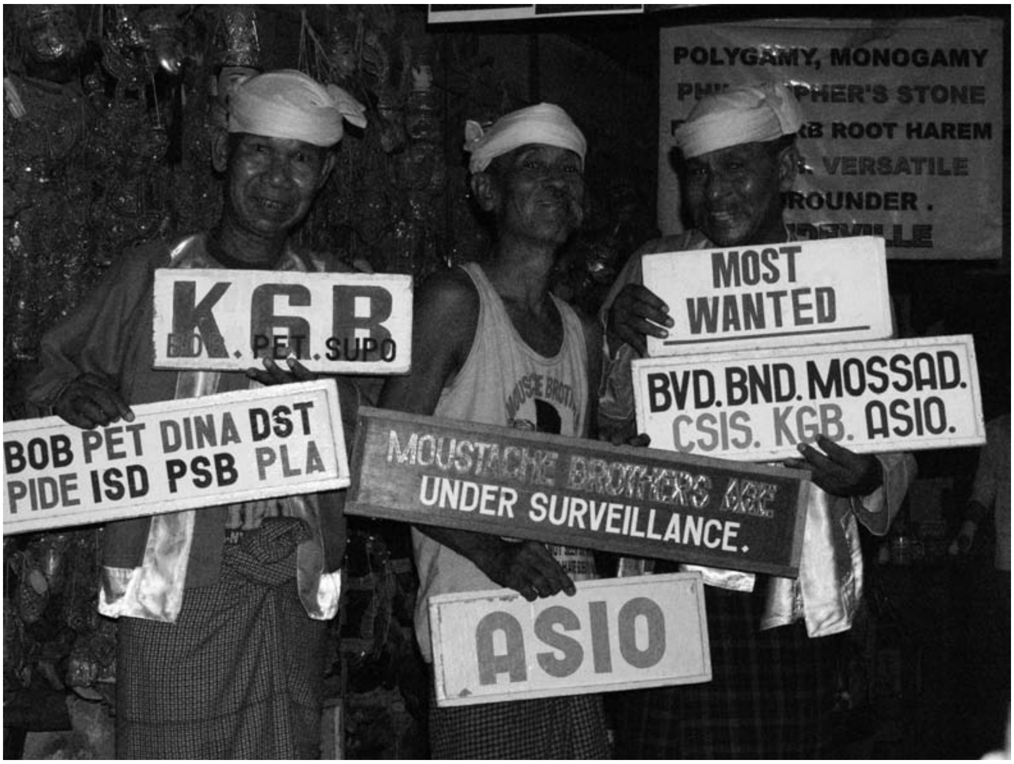

Figure 1. The Moustache Brothers, from left: Lu Zaw, Lu Maw, and Par Par Lay, 2007. (Photo by Xan Colman)

pariah: a callous dictatorship that reigns with little resistance, while enjoying luxuries its people have never even seen; an imprisoned champion of democracy, beloved by the people; and a place with corruption and poverty on a scale that has left the country several decades behind its neighbors in education, health, and infrastructure.

In the midst of all of this, we found a group of performers whose theatre has for decades been rehearsing a revolution—without an approaching opening night. We saw one such "rehearsal" when we visited Burma in July 2007, and then with the world we witnessed the tragedy of the months that followed. The junta's inaction following the June 2008 cyclone, along with restrictions on the flow of foreign aid, only served to further demonstrate the disregard the junta has for its citizens, and any discussion of Burma would do a disservice to the lives of its people, should it fail to mention this most recent human rights abomination.

In July 2007, we assessed the level of risk involved in entering Burma. Based at the time with a theatre company in northern Thailand, we wanted to experience more broadly the performing arts traditions of Southeast Asia and, in particular, to make contact with local Burmese dissident performers: the Moustache Brothers. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs advises Australians to revise plans for travel in certain areas of Burma and exercise extreme caution in others. We had heard reports of tourists having their luggage trawled through, recording devices and computing equipment confiscated, and being subjected to lengthy interrogations. Should we take laptops, cameras, phones? How much technology would mark us as something more than tourists? We settled for video and still cameras, and left the computers at our base in Thailand. In actual fact we experienced very little official scrutiny over the course of our visit to Burma. Our most enduring experience of the junta was the absence of its overt presence, but this absence had its own malevolence; a sense of suspicion or uneasy calm pervaded most of the public places we visited around the country.

Burma retains an idyllic pastoral charm, standing as one of the few places with little Western presence or influence. There are no McDonald's or other fast-food conglomerate outlets, no ATMs or credit card facilities; to write of this now seems almost fanciful. The contradiction of the country's commerce trading widely with the US dollar is heightened further by the fact that notes printed before 1995 are not accepted, and the exchange from dollars to the local *kyat* ("chat") often happens in two transactions—the first into dollar-equivalent "Foreign Exchange Certificates" (FEC), the second into kyat. Curiously, the dollar-equivalent FEC buys around 10 to 15 percent fewer kyat than the original dollar, a covert commission that put more than USD 1.5 million of cyclone relief aid straight into the regime's bank account in the two months following the June 2008 cyclone. The kyat is almost obsolete and certainly close to worthless—it functions more like equivalent nickel, dime, and quarter coins. We carry wads of kyat to pay for rickshaws and use at food stalls, although all the proprietors would of course prefer the dollar bills.

The question of whether to travel as a tourist to Burma is a complex one. The junta tightly controls tourist access into and around the country, and most services on the hard-worn tourist trail are operated by government-run or government-partnered organizations, meaning that without stepping off the trail a little, a good chunk of your tourist dollar ends up in the coffers of the junta or its sympathizers. For many years the pro-democracy movement discouraged tourism for this reason, but now its position is reversed, encouraging outside eyes to witness the state of affairs in Burma and to connect with locals in a bid to reverse isolation. It's a sometimes tenuous balance, and while we feel implicated in the injustice of our boat fares paying junta salaries, our individual dollar investment is small and must surely be offset by cracking open the isolation of the people we've come to meet.

We attract the attention of the locals, most of all in the town of Mandalay, which has less to entice backpackers and touring retirees than Yangon—the former capital and most metropolitan area of Burma—or Bagan and its 35 kilometres of Buddhist temples and ruins, or the floating villages of Inlay Lake. In Mandalay we are more of a curiosity than elsewhere, and we spend long stretches of time without seeing a Western face. Aside from merchants eager to sell us the Burmese experience, the people rarely approach us, despite their obvious curiosity. Some almost seem fearful of us (or perhaps of someone that might be watching us).

We are extraordinarily wealthy in Burma by local standards, and despite trying to support only the local economy in preference to government-endorsed establishments, sometimes this is not possible. At our hotel in Mandalay we ask reception if we may use the internet. "Of course you may," except that upon trying, it does not work. We ask if we may make an international phone call. "Of course you may," except that upon trying, it does not work. We ask if they can direct us to the Moustache Brothers. "We do not understand," they say. "We do not know these people." The Moustaches are mentioned in the movie *About a Boy* and in the *Lonely Planet* guidebook. They have a recognized following across international comedy, human rights, and tourist circles, and the ignorance of our hotel staff appears feigned and strained. We are clearly staying at a government-endorsed hotel, and the staff are performing subterfuge. One can easily imagine an official edict decreed in a government bureau somewhere that the Moustaches do not in fact exist. Of course the denials of the staff merely increase the intrigue and raise the challenge. By restricting the Moustaches, by imprisoning them, by disallowing their minions to speak of them, the junta has created a tourist attraction that advertises its corruption.

We set off into the Mandalay night, following the vague directions of an out-of-date guidebook, which leads us along a potholed street, lit only from the dilapidated footstalls scattered at corners. Despite its status as a bustling commercial center, fed by the import of cheap manufactured goods from China, Mandalay has a make-do-ness about it. It is evident in the buildings, the houses where the residents are clearly too busy surviving to be concerned

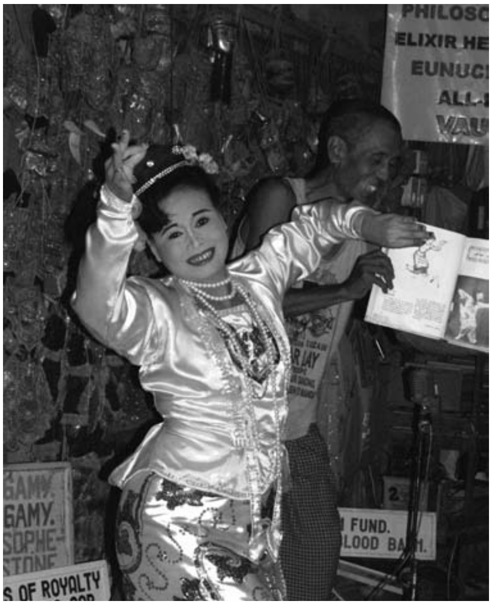

Figure 2. Ni Ni Lin (wife of Lu Maw) performing traditional Burmese dance phrases, 2007. (Photo by Xan Colman)

with dirt floors and decay. It is evident in the dark Mandalay streets through which our rickshaw bounces. Only one street in Mandalay has streetlights—and along only part of its length at that—and even were it otherwise, one of the largest complaints of the people remains the unreliability of the power supply.

We arrive in front of a two-story shack with a decaying banner reading "The Moustaches" and gather among a handful of tourists. This is the given address, though it isn't immediately clear where any performance might take place. We are greeted first by a nephew of one of the performers. He wants to tell us their story, but his poor English is prohibitive. There is conspiracy in the gathering. It is already political.

The stage turns out to be the main room of their house. We are invited in to sit on plastic chairs surrounded by hundreds of marionettes and posters displaying maps, publicity materials, photos of the Moustaches meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi (leader of Burma's National League for Democracy), and signs grouping lists of English synonyms for styles of performance and acts of surveillance. Various members of the group fuss with props and with seating audience members; there is no obvious beginning to the show.

We are welcomed by Lu Maw, the master of ceremonies and main comedic presence. He rattles and buzzes with energy, having more to say than he either has language for or can fit into the time he has available. The Moustaches have discarded their traditional form of performance—all-night operas and dramas with religious themes once performed for the aristocracy—partly because the government has refused them a license to perform and partly to use a form that can directly criticize the power structures in Burma. The show we see contains representations of the old forms in the skillfully performed restorations of the dance-dramas offered as a lesson in Burma's history. The performers, both men and women, wear boldly colored costumes with wrapped fabric skirts. Gestural vocabularies are drawn from traditional stories, abstracted to follow the rhythm of the music: severe hand positions, highly stylized postural positions, grounded stamping and shuffling, and traveling steps in full squat—the mechanics obscured by the long satin skirts.

The dance-drama is uncomfortably blended with the Moustache version of Western stand-up: jokes about potholes, parodies of government cronies taking backhanded bonuses, satirical stories about the lack of electricity. Most of this political jocularity we've experienced first hand: the sore backsides from potholed rickshaw rides, the line-towing of those linked with official power, the eerie absence of street lights; we experience them almost as minor curiosities. We likewise experience the Moustaches' critical satire as light lampooning—it remains incomprehensible that jail could await the teller of these simple witticisms. But as their show reinforces, this is Burma, and the junta doesn't often deal in the comprehensible.

The audience knows the score. Western tourists all, they are nervous at the political jokes but stoic, and Lu Maw plays on this. He lets us know that outside, one of his nephews keeps watch for government agents. We met this nephew on the way in, so this appears to be true.

> LU MAW: They come, we go out through back door, police arrests the tourists! (2007a)

His jokes are punctuated by his own cackling. The potential for reality to imitate this joke so closely resonates in the audience, but it's also why we're here. Our attendance is its own challenge to repression: the audience itself is performing protest.

Through their representations of the oppressor and the oppressed, the Moustaches' political critique is clearly painted. Lu Maw describes the performance as vaudeville or burlesque, but the Moustaches' desire to entertain appears to be secondary to their need to speak to Westerners about the sociopolitical situation in Burma, and about their own direct experiences of the junta's rule. It is an implicit invitation to us to dig deeper, to ask ourselves what brought us here in the first place—art or resistance?

We return the following day to talk with Lu Maw, and the room we had watched the troupe perform in is populated with relatives on makeshift stretcher-beds, sleeping through the midday heat. Lu Maw offers us tea.

> Up till now we are alive, because of tourist—tourist eye, tourist ear. Tourist protect our family. They come and arrest anytime. I tell my joke in my performance here I know not freedom—I, how do you say—skating on thin ice. They come and arrest any time. That's why I need tourist. (2007b)

During a 1996 pro-democracy rally at the house of Aung San Suu Kyi, two of the Moustache Brothers performed material that satirized the junta's rule. Lu Maw says of the performance: "Sing songs. Ditty. Every song a joke. Many joke. Many joke. Not one joke, not two joke. Not 20. Over 200. The government, they want to drop dead. Drop dead? Drop dead" (2007b).

Lu Maw had stayed in Mandalay (to "hold the fort door"). His absence saved him from imprisonment. For their jokes, brother Par Par Lay ("Number One Moustache") and "cousin brother" Lu Zaw were arrested and incarcerated, without any trial. As Lu Maw says:

> My brother, five year, seven month, in the slammer, in the clink. They sent them to the hard labor camp, Kyein Kran Ka, Kachin state. Deep jungle…digging stones, big hammer big stones. Three four people on a stone, [to make] gravel. (2007b)

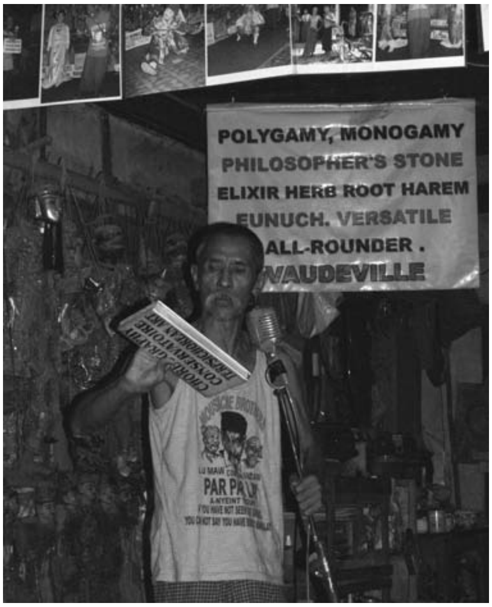

Figure 3. Lu Maw ("Number Two Moustache"), MC of the show, 2007. (Photo by Xan Colman)

In 2001, due to international campaigns headed by Amnesty International and with the vocal support of international comedians and comedians' associations, as well as organizations like the Body Shop—which collected 1.6 million thumbprints and used them to compose a portrait of the pair as a means of drawing attention to their incarceration—Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw were released on the condition that they discontinue performing. But, as Lu Maw continues, "We never listen, the government didn't like, tells us to stop. In this ear out the other" (2007b). The junta controls the licenses for public performances, and the Moustaches had now been refused permission. Barred from leaving Mandalay, the trio began to perform nightly in the front room of their house, which they continue to do to this day.

> LU MAW: Now I tell you a joke. [When General] Ne Win died [he] transform. Transform? You know transform? Transform into big fish under the water. General Ne Win. Now he live under the sea, under river, under the sea. "Oh I am

> sorry," every country crying [*Lu Maw mimes the people crying mock grief into his hands*].
>
> You know tsunami wave? Hit Indonesia. Many house, many hotel damaged, many people died. Wave enter Thailand many people die, many damage. Wave enter the Burma, but suddenly, under the water, big fish [General Ne Win] comes up to the top of the water, fish stop the water, "Stop please stop, you are too late, I have done damage already."

Lu Maw laughs at his joke, "That's comedian: 'You are too late!'" (2007b)

When asked what sort of impact he thinks their show has on the democracy movement, Lu Maw says: "I need a little spark." He mimes the spark from his cigarette lighter, but changes his metaphor to elaborate:

> LU MAW: There is a crack and later, big crack.
>
> COLMAN: How long do you think it will take for the crack to get really big?
>
> LU MAW: [*Laughs*] Oh we must wait. Oh I cannot know. Like Soviet, like Soviet, like Germany. Like North Korea. (2007b)

Using their skills in performance, the Moustaches sell their story of incarceration as a way of surviving and as a channel for critiquing the government to the ears of an international community. They join a long history of unsanctioned performance and we, the international community, are drawn to see them perform the resistance of their oppressors. That is the show that is worth all the money in the world—the hot ticket. Lu Maw jokes with us that he rips us off, that we are sitting ducks. Having traveled through the region, and witnessed the poverty of the people, we don't feel like he's ripping us off. When the mere 10 dollars we spend on two tickets to the Moustaches can buy one child's books and uniforms for an entire year, it seems a worthy transaction. We realize that we came to Mandalay in search of both art and resistance. We find that for the Moustaches they are one and the same.

The Moustaches perform the same routine, night after night—each night, a new group of foreign ears. There in that living room, where the breadth of their artistic heritage and its night-long performance tradition could not be more distant, they repeat their curtailed craft in rehearsal for a revolution that feels so unlikely it just might happen tomorrow. Shortly after our visit, during August and September 2007, we held our breath as the monks led the people onto the streets. Par Par Lay was arrested and detained again—no reason for the arrest was offered, and his relatives were given no information as to his whereabouts. Again with substantial pressure from Amnesty International, he was released, but only after several months of incarceration.

The fact that the Moustaches are not allowed to perform freely is just one more in a catalogue of ridiculous restrictions contrived by a paranoid regime. In the closed climate of Burma, the act of repression is unremarkable, and this is the ultimate travesty. Yet inside those rigid invisible walls, a flame that has been trodden on repeatedly for the best part of half a century continues to flicker—and that just might be all it takes.

> SEARLE: What do you want for your country?
>
> LU MAW: Freedom of speech, freedom of joke, freedom of write, freedom of performance.
>
> SEARLE: Is there anything specific you want for yourself?
>
> LU MAW: I want for them I want for myself. Because now if I am freedom, they cannot watch, they want to hire they cannot. They need freedom. Not only me. That's why everybody need the freedom. (2007b)

References

Lu Maw

2007a	Lu Maw—Moustache Brothers Performance. Mandalay, 16 July.
2007b	Personal interview with authors. Mandalay, 17 July.

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