

## Richard Phillips interviews water puppet director

# "A unique form of art"

5 February 1999

*Le Van Ngo is the artistic director of Vietnam's internationally-acclaimed Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe of Hanoi. He joined Thang Long in 1970 and is leading figure in the popularisation of this ancient and unique art form.*

*Le Van Ngo trained in theatrical arts at Hanoi's School for the Arts and was apprenticed to various water puppet guilds in Thai Binh, Nam Ha and Hanoi. As artistic director he has been central to the company's development and led most of the numerous international tours undertaken by the puppet company since it began touring in the 1980s. Vu Thi Tuyet Thuy provided translation for the interview.*

**Richard Phillips:** When was your puppet troupe established?

**Le Van Ngo:** Our theatre company was formed October 10, 1969 in Hanoi, during the war. In the beginning there were only nine puppeteers. With technical and administrative workers, our total staff numbered 20 people.

At that time we only used common puppets, not water puppets, and our performances were for children at kindergarten and schools. As the war became more and more severe, many people, particularly the children, were moved to the countryside for safety. Our puppet company moved to these areas and organised ourselves into smaller groups so that we could perform for as many villages as possible.

**RP:** What was the response? Was it popular?

**LVN:** Yes. The villagers and the children enjoyed our work very much because all of the performances were based on the legends and stories of Vietnam. These stories dealt with the daily life of normal people--the issues that faced their families and other simple subjects. The stories also had a high educational character.

**RP:** Could you describe some of the conditions you faced during the war?

**LVN:** It was a difficult time. Naturally, we lacked many things--there were shortages of technical equipment and other items that we needed--but the dangers we faced were no different from anybody else in the north. The government developed an alarm system to warn the people when enemy planes invaded our territory. During the bombing raids we

would stop performing, as soon as they were over we would start again.

**RP:** When did you decide to learn water puppetry? Was it difficult to convince the villagers to teach you?

**LVN:** Yes, you are right, it was difficult at first to discover the techniques.

We began learning water puppetry in 1983, after the war had ended. During the war, and the time we spent in the country, we would always ask the villagers about the origins of water puppetry and how we could learn these skills.

Water puppetry, which began in the 11th century, is a unique form of art--a form that exists only in Vietnam. It had many closely-guarded secrets and only a small group of villagers knew its skills. We don't know the exact number of people involved in the 11th century, this has been too difficult to discover, but we know that in modern times only five villages practiced water puppetry.

As I said, its customs have been carefully protected over the years. According to tradition, the local artists only taught these skills to their sons. Daughters would not be taught because if they married a man from another village, the techniques would be revealed or lost. The skills were handed down from father to son over many, many years.

In 1983 the government convinced the villagers that water puppetry should be preserved and developed. The village puppeteers gradually understood and soon began to teach us. Some of those who taught were 60 and 70 years old. Local artists then began to teach their daughters, as well as their sons, and so we were also able to learn from the younger artists.

The first international tour of water puppetry took place in 1984 in France. It was performed by the village artists. The first performance of water puppetry by our theatre troupe was in 1987. This was after several years of training.

**RP:** Are new stories being developed by water puppeteers?

**LVN:** The items that you saw have not basically changed for the last 1,000 years. This is the traditional art of our country and therefore we have to retain the main content. The villages that practised water puppetry have their own stories and acts. We have selected the best ones and

developed some new techniques to make them more interesting, attractive and appealing to people in modern life. Originally water puppetry was performed and developed in the village ponds during the day. Nowadays we can use electricity and with colorful lighting and special effects make these scenes more beautiful.

*RP:* What is the response to your work in Vietnam today?

*LVN:* It has become very popular and we perform all year round without any holiday breaks. Many people--children and adults--come to see the show, not just once but many times. There are also foreign tourists and people from other parts of Vietnam who come to Hanoi to see our work.

More artists have learnt in the last few years and so this art is spreading to other parts of the country. Today the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre has over 30 puppeteers and we are divided into two troupes--one which can tour and come to Australia and other countries, the other, which performs in Hanoi. We also train artists from Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces who come to Hanoi and visit the villages where they learn from the local artists.

*RP:* How would you explain its popularity over the centuries?

*LVN:* As you know, water puppetry was originally created by the peasants in the Red River delta in the north of Vietnam. Its content is the normal daily life of the peasants--fishing, farming, village life--as well as legendary stories based on the history of Vietnam. It expresses the peasant's aspirations for a peaceful life, the love of nature, the love of simple labouring work.

I think it is the expression of these simple values that makes it popular, not only in Vietnam over the years, but today in other parts of the world. Obviously everyone loves life, nature and desires a peaceful and contented life. And, of course, the unusual characteristics of this art form--that the water is the stage--makes it interesting and attractive.

*RP:* Is your work funded by the government or by ticket sales? How do artists, writers and filmmakers finance their work in Vietnam today?

*LVN:* The budget for the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre is provided by the Vietnamese state and the government. Every year we submit our plan and are provided funds. They encourage us to increase the quality of the performance and attract larger audiences, and in this way improve conditions for artists. The Vietnamese government also provides funds for the cinema and other arts.

In Vietnam the artist is given enough to ensure that we have adequate living conditions. The artist is treated with priority. Naturally some film stars, famous singers or musicians in Vietnam receive higher salaries but you cannot compare this to the amount of money provided to big stars from other countries.

*RP:* What qualities do you look for when selecting people to join your troupe?

*LVN:* To train as a puppeteer you must have some basic educational qualifications--you must have graduated from high school. Second, you must be strong and this is important because the puppets are heavy. And finally, you have to be skilled in singing, dancing, music and art in general.

Young people selected to be trained as water puppeteers are sent to Art College for three years and after graduating spend two more years involved in practical work. So the total time spent studying is five years.

On graduation from Art College they are assigned to different theatres. The theatres work out how many new artists they need each year and send their requests to the art college. The students are interviewed and selected by the theatres according to their skills and knowledge.

*RP:* You said earlier that the Vietnamese water puppets began touring in 1984. Were you surprised by the refusal of the Australian government to provide you with visas? Could you comment on this?

*LVN:* We have done many international tours but have never encountered this problem before. When we first heard news that the Australian government had refused to provide us with visas we were saddened and a little bit surprised. We thought perhaps that the government had made a mistake or some official had slipped up. Was there someone in one of the departments who had misunderstood our application? It was very strange.

We believe that most governments around the world understand that it is always important to pay close attention to artistic questions and what happens to artists. This should be the case here. Artists are bridges to connect people together, to create good relations and establish friendship between countries and people around the world. This is how we see our work.

We hope there will be no difficulties when we visit again but I want you to allow me to thank the journalists in Australia who publicised this situation and brought it to the attention of the public. This helped us overcome the problem and eventually we were given visas. I also want to thank those who organised our visit and finally, to express our sincere thanks to the Australian audiences who gave us such strong encouragement.



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