

The Rocket: Modest but sympathetic tale about Laotian villagers

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Written and directed by Kim Mordaunt

The Rocket is a light-weight but compassionate work about a poverty-stricken displaced peasant family from northern Laos. Written and directed by Australian filmmaker Kim Mordaunt, it centres on the life of 10-year-old Ahlo (Sitthiphon Disamoe), the family's only son. The movie references aspects of Laos' complex culture and recent history, in particular, the deadly aftermath of the Vietnam War and the impact on rural communities of major dam developments.

In 2007 Mordaunt directed *Bomb Harvest*, a feature-length documentary about bomb disposal squads attempting to clear Laos of the tons of unexploded US ordnance dropped during the Vietnam War. Between 1964 and 1973, the American military disgorged over two million tons of bombs on Laos, making it the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. Over 20,000 people, almost half of these children, have been killed or injured by munitions left over from the Vietnam conflict since 1973.

The Rocket begins with Ahlo's difficult birth on a stormy night in a remote northern Laotian mountain valley. The baby boy is a twin, but his sibling is stillborn. According to village beliefs, twins can bring either good or bad luck. Taitok (Bunsri Yindi), his grandmother, is convinced that Ahlo will only bring bad times and so must be killed to protect the family.

Mali (Alice Kephavong), Ahlo's mother, fiercely rejects these demands and the boy survives. While there is little documentary evidence that this sort of infanticide is still practised in Laos, Ahlo's 'curse' is central to the movie's plot and the story moves forward ten years.

Ahlo's grandmother remains suspicious of the young boy because he always appears to bring misfortune to the family. The peasant villagers are forced to abandon

their homes to make way for a massive dam being constructed by an Australian-Laotian consortium. There are vague pledges of better times by dam authorities, but the relocation is a disaster and Mali is killed in a tragic accident, which grandmother Taitok blames on the boy. The promised new homes, electricity and running water at the new location fail to materialise. The new settlement, in fact, is a chaotic and poverty-stricken shantytown.

Ahlo meets Kia (Lounnam Kaosainam), a young orphan girl, on the road to the shantytown and they become best friends. She introduces him to her eccentric Uncle Purple (Thep Phongam) who is obsessed with American soul singer James Brown and permanently dressed in a weather-beaten purple suit. Purple is a marginalised figure, having actively supported the US military during the Vietnam War.

Ahlo attempts to tap into shantytown's rudimentary electricity supply but only succeeds in blacking out the entire settlement. "As of today," Purple says to the young boy, "I'm the second-most hated person in this place." Ahlo and his family, along with Purple and Kia, are forced to flee to another community, hitching a ride on a cart carrying unexploded bombs.

The ever-optimistic Ahlo hears about a local Rocket Festival, an annual event where dangerous homemade missiles are blasted "towards the gods" in order to provoke rain. The highest-flying rocket wins a large cash prize. Ahlo decides to enter the competition in the hope that it will break his "curse", redeem his difficult relations with his father and allow the family to buy some land.

The dramatic highpoint of the film is the rocket festival as the irrepressible Ahlo and other competitors risk life and limb with their homemade rockets. The movie cleverly intercuts footage from a real rocket

festival to place cinemagoers at the heart of this jubilant and chaotic event.

The Rocket has won a number international festival awards and was chosen as Australia's submission for the Best Foreign Film category at next year's Academy Awards. The performances by Sitthiphon Disamoe and Loungnam Kaosainam are strong, with real electricity in their relationship. Disamoe—originally from the Thai/Laos border and a former street kid—won the best actor prize at this year's Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

While Mordaunt's film—his first fiction feature—should be commended for highlighting some of the issues facing people in Laos, one of the poorest countries in the world, it is not a flawless work. The movie fails to explore in any depth the issues it touches on and some of its cultural references are wrongheaded.

The opening birth scene, for example, is not entirely accurate. All the older females of the entire tribe usually participate in the birthing process, not just the mother-to-be and her mother as portrayed in *The Rocket*. Mali, Ahlo's mother, is also rather too sophisticated and shows little physical signs of the harsh life endured by these poverty-stricken people.

More importantly, Ahlo and his family are generally presented as victims of circumstances—politically passive with no overt opposition to the dam development or communal connection to the rest of their home village. This does not ring true and ignores the numerous political conflicts over dam development.

In 1999, peasant villagers determinedly opposed construction of the Houay Ho dam before being forcibly relocated by government authorities. Land allocated to the resettled families was grossly inadequate with 95 percent still suffering rice deficiencies for most of the year.

These experiences would not have been lost on other villagers forced to endure the same fate or those portrayed in *The Rocket*. According to International Rivers, there are over 72 new dams currently under construction or in the advanced stages of planning in Laos. Thirteen of these are along the Mekong River and will drastically affect food supplies to the more than 60 million people in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Director Kim Mordaunt has worked in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos over many years and is no doubt

aware of peasant opposition to their loss of animals, land and livelihood via government decree, but glosses over this issue. Whether this was due to budgetary limitations or Laotian government censorship is not clear.

The closing scenes of *The Rocket* suggest that Ahlo and his family have a brighter future and that the poverty, dislocations and the bloody legacy of the Vietnam War are receding. One leaves the cinema, however, mindful of the obvious contradiction between Mordaunt's upbeat ending and the brutal reality of life for most Lao people, and with the nagging feeling that too much has been left untold.



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