



Thailand's *ligay* troupes, numbering around 1,000 in the mid-1970s, travel throughout various parts of the country (especially during the dry season), performing at village festivals and temple fairs where these story-lines are embellished with anecdotes and cultural references depicted through humour and fun (*sanook*, in the Thai language).

Although traditional *ligay* remains a fundamental part of Thailand's predominantly Buddhist culture, one Chiang Mai-based Christian ministry has also adapted (and adopted) this art form.

It was in 1968 when Allan Eubank, a Reverend; and wife, Joan - a star amid the screens and stages of Broadway and the UK (who "left this former life") had their first encounter with *ligay* while working as missionaries in Central Thailand.

Inspiration for using this centuries-old art form as a ministry tool came from an atypical source: a much-wanted Thai bandit who had "found God" and wanted to tell his *compadres* about his new-found liberation. "Let me tell the Bible stories about the love of God, and its

power in changing our lives, by using the Thai folk theater (*ligay*)," he told Allan. "And they will understand. It's not a foreign culture; it's theirs."

Allan was blasted by the idea and immediately considered Joan's professional background as a means for bringing this innovative idea to fruition. There was no time for organizing the *ligay* performance. Therefore, he and Joan placed this idea on a shelf, until an "accidental" encounter years later would re-ignite this flame.

The Eubanks came to Chiang Mai in 1971, after being called for teaching at a seminary school then consisting of about 70 students (which has grown since into Payap University). In 1974, a nearby vehicle accident left a woman suffering from a shard of glass lodged in her eye. Searching for words while consoling her, Scripture surfaced from Allan's heart: "All things work together for good, to those who love the Lord." Comforted, she revealed how her family included professional *ligay* performers. Allan once again shelved the *ligay* idea. However, she joined the seminary the following year.

In 1976, after she had put on a traditional *ligay* performance during the Christmas season (at what is now Payap University), Allan approached with a potential script (written in Thai), which was adapted for telling Bible stories - *ligay*-style. He later worked with her father at making it a reality.

Ligay (pronounced lee-gay) is a folk stage drama addressing the rawness of life by presenting it in a melodramatic way. It encapsulates and distills life's issues down into sentimental forms that tug at the heartstrings of country people.

With its roots in ancient Middle-Eastern culture where villagers implemented what was previously a Palace activity into their communities, *ligay* was brought into Thailand via Indonesia and Malaysia - adapted into, and adopted as, Thailand's own art form.

It has since been carried to the stage by traveling character-performers, collectively called a troupe - clad in ornate, colourful costumes and accessories - consisting of the *phra-ake* (lead actor); *nang-ake* (lead actress); *dua-kong* (villain); *dua-itcha* or jealous woman (villainess); as well as male or female comedians.

Performers improvise dialogues and songs embellishing a story-line addressing social aspects varying from folklore to current events, both true and fiction - all containing elements of pantomime, comic folk opera and social satire.

A *ligay* performance is presented in three parts: the musical prelude, which beckons passersby; introduction, which pays respect to the now-Thai art form's Malaysian roots (*ork kaek*); and opening performances, where the character-actors introduce themselves via song and dance. Then comes the performance proper, which traditionally stretches into the small hours.



Three females (including the woman from the accident) and one male performed the Biblical story of the Prodigal Daughter - adapted and depicting a then-current story of a persuasive Thai boy who had lured his girlfriend into scampering off to Bangkok with him. (Allan knew of three Thai families who were experiencing this type of scenario).

The Church of Christ in Thailand and the Thai government loved the performance. It was considered entertaining while helping preserve Thai culture with a positive message. Joan later gave formal art direction for bringing the student-comprised troupe up to professional standards.

For three years, they experimented using various forms of drama as a means for ministry. And after receiving much positive feedback from the Thai community at large, an independent ministry was clearly becoming needed.

It was now 1981, and the Christian Communications Institute (CCI) was officially established. And over 30 of the Eubank's 50 years of ministry service in Thailand have since been dedicated to the CCI's success - using television, radio, tapes, CDs, DVDs, as well as traditional and modern drama for communicating the Gospel in a way that is easily understood by Thai people (especially since almost all domestic performances are in the Thai language).

Although *ligay* was popular in Thailand at the time of the CCI's onset, television's growing prominence was (and continues) taking a stranglehold on it. Younger people were losing interest, their expectations of the Arts leaning toward Western forms. Hence, *ligay*'s traditional risqué components related to sexual connotation and social sarcasm were becoming evermore necessary for keeping this art form alive.

Furthermore, somewhat like Europe's gypsies, traditional *ligay* troupes were sometimes considered crude and looked down upon due to sociological components of their sub-culture. However, Allan and Joan continued trying to enhance this reputation because they consider Thailand their "home...(and) love Thai culture and want to honour and preserve it."

The CCI's *ligay* troupes have addressed many important social issues during their scripted, two-hour-long performances - in Thailand and abroad. Joan spoke of "an effective drama" about HIV and AIDS, which educated people on how this disease is not contracted through their every-day contacts with others. (This is important because in Thai culture, the negative aspects of life, like illnesses (as well as the positive ones), are routinely referred to as one's karma.)

Other *ligay* performances have addressed issues related to drugs, corruption, child abuse and the sex industry. Generally, troupes are well-received. However, on one occasion, when the CCI's *ligay* was about females being forced into the sex industry, performers experienced rather unusual feedback from a man who fired a bullet at the stage from a brothel across the street.

The CCI's performances harness a primary underlying message of "forgiveness of sins," which is not directly part of Thai culture's traditional religious tenets. As an example, one performance depicted a woman who contracted AIDS through her husband's promiscuity. When she and his *mia noi* (mistress) were on their death beds, the wife forgave them both.

People's fear of spirits in Thailand is something that struck Allan many moons ago, especially since he didn't believe in roaming spirits. However, life experience has changed his worldview related to this. And the CCI is seeking to counter such fears related to life and death, especially in Thai culture. "This is about breaking down prejudice, not only religiously, but in your social life too," said Joan. "And, hey, God is cross-cultural...not a foreign message...and is fit for every culture."

Allan says "religion is a human response to a higher power." And he wants people "to know Jesus Christ, in a way that is not a Western imposition, and is truth not cluttered with (aspects of) a foreign culture. I want them to see that this also fits their culture."

Formally retiring 15 years ago, the Eubanks are pleased that weaving Christian principles into Thai culture is continuing to thrive with new direction at the CCI's helm.

Although its *ligay* performances contain a different "substance" message than what's presented traditionally, Allan says "our performers really work hard to make it fun (for audience members)."

Why would someone attend? Joan says people are going to feel, more than think, about life's issues in an "open way - for community, fun and an escape into real life..."

