



Bamboo puppets bring rural play to life

Vuong Bach Lien



Wooden acting: Countryside girls in the puppet show have been made from bamboo and old clothes. – Photos courtesy of the Vietnam Water Puppetry Theatre

It is just another day in the Vietnamese countryside. A mother lulls her baby to sleep, a boy plays the flute while sitting on a buffalo's back, men and women sing as they harvest rice in the fields and a woman takes a boat through a lake of lotus flowers.

Suddenly the scene stops. The audience applauds.
Up on the little stage, the colourful puppets exit the scene.

These characters are the handmade creations of the Vietnam Puppetry Theatre. They may just be put together with straw and bamboo and sticks and string, but they have touched the hearts of audiences by showing them scenes of the countryside life that many remember from their childhood.

The show, titled *Nhip Dieu Que Huong* (Countryside's Rhythm), was a big hit with Ha Noi audiences when it premiered in April, and will be performed in Canada at the end of this year to celebrate the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The 90-minute performance features stick puppetry, string puppetry and hand puppetry.
"I hope that audiences will get a sense of the soul of Vietnamese culture through our puppetry. I would be very happy if we make them feel proud of their culture and if we inspire the interest of foreign audiences," said the show's director Nguyen Tien Dung, who is also the deputy director of the theatre.

Audiences at the show's Vietnamese debut were full of praise for Dung's achievement.
"I am very impressed to learn that our artists can create so many beautiful characters with bamboo and straw. Even the plants and animals have been given life," said Nguyen Thanh Ha, a 30-year-old teacher. "Those puppets take me back to my wonderful childhood."

Celebrating bamboo

Dung said that while bamboo puppets appeared on stage a long time ago in Vietnam, this is the first time that his 60-year-old theatre has used them to tell diverse stories about the countryside.

The artist wants to promote the image of bamboo, a plant he has loved since a young age, as well as the Vietnamese countryside.

Bamboo, which grows almost everywhere in Vietnam (especially in rural areas), is a significant symbol of both Vietnamese culture and daily life.

And when preparing for the show, the talented artists of the Vietnam Puppetry Theatre chose to use bamboo for the central cast of characters.

Closely woven bamboo baskets, normally used to carry shrimp and fish, were cut up and used to form the bodies and faces of the play's rural girls, farmers and fishermen and their hands were made from small bamboo pieces connected by string.

Even familiar rural animals, including pigs, buffaloes and chickens, were created from bamboo to take a place on the stage.

The result of all this effort is an authentic and poetic depiction of the countryside and daily life there.

Traditional music also aids the show, adding character to scenes showing a noisy local market or a joyful village festival.

Dung found an orchestra to perform the accompanying music using a *dan tranh* (16-chord zither) and *dan bau* (monochord), among other traditional instruments.

The puppets are able to dance and sing along to the music, creating a remarkable effect. The creative team has even worked with musicians to recreate the rural cries of frogs and toads.

A long time in the making

The theatre's 18 artists are required to operate the puppets on the stage. It is an intricate and intensive business and rehearsals took one whole month.

Puppeteer Nguyen The Long said that it's difficult for artists to perform bamboo puppetry because the puppets are harder, rougher and heavier than the normal which are commonly made out of old clothes. Artists are required to train longer than with other shows.

"Sometimes when we touch the puppets too hard, we get hurt. But the show is a new idea and we are very excited to perform it, despite the occasional bruises and cuts," said Lan Huong.

Nguyen Thuy Trang, who has worked at the theatre for 35 years, also appreciates the originality of the show.

"The play is performed in a modern style and so it is very suitable for young dynamic artists. The show allows us to show off our talent and technique and helps us quickly improve our skills," she said.

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