

Asia Society
Presents

Music and Dance from Myanmar:
Shwe Man Thabin Zat Pwe

Directors

Shwe Man Chan Thar
Tin Maung San Min Win

Music Director

Thiri Maung Maung

U.S. Tour Manager

U Aye Swe

April 10-11, 2015
8:00 P.M.

Pre-performance lecture by Kit Young
7:00 P.M.

725 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10021

This program is approximately 90 minutes with an intermission



**Music and Dance from Myanmar:
Shwe Man Thabin Zat Pwe Program**

“Ta Khaing Lon Shwe” (The Spray of Golden Flowers)

“Ti Lon” - Instrumental Prelude

U Han Ba (1888-1966), Composer

Thiri Maung Maung Shwe Ta Sait Hsaing Waing Ensemble

1. Phaya Gadaw Kan (Invocation Prayer to the Buddha)

Shwe Man Thabin Company

A. Si Mi Kwet A Ka (Candlelight Offering Dance)

San Shwe Sin, *Minthamee*

B. Pwe Taw Hmyauk (Raising the Offering Bowl to the Nat Spirits)

Shwe Joe Jar, *Minthamee*

C. Hpakant Min Pu Zaw (Offering to the Nat King of Hpakant)

San Min Aung, *Mintha*

San Shwe Sin, *Minthamee*

2. Hni Ko Hkwe Myaing Hta (The Royal Duet in a Sylvan Setting)

Shwe Man Chan Thar dances both *Mintha* and *Minthamee* roles

3. Sagaing Byaw: So - Ti - A Ka (The Byaw Tune from Sagaing: Song, Music, Dance)

Composer: A-1 Saya Hnya

Shwe Man Win Maung, *Mintha* Vocalist

Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, *Mintha* Duet; Shwe Joe Jar, *Minthamee*

4. Kyei Let Pyaing Pwe: (Folk Dance Medley and Competition)

Shwe Man Chan Thar, Eastern Village *Mintha*

Tin Maung San Min Win, Western Village *Mintha*

San Shwe Sin, Central Village Maiden

5. Htamein Na Hke A Ka (The Flicking of the Htamein Skirt’s White Train Dance)

Shwe Joe Jar, *Minthamee*

6. Yok Thay A Ka (The Dance of the Marionettes)

Saw Yu Nwe, Puppeteer

San Min Aung, Marionette

7. San Taw Kyein Ti Lon Hnin Mintha Yein (Proclamation Music and Mintha Group Dance)

Composer: Sein Ba Maung Kalei

Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, San Min Aung, Ye Yint Htet Aung, *Mintha* Ensemble

8. Man Nat Hnin Tha Mi Thon Paw (Mara Sends His Three Daughters to Tempt the Meditating Buddha) Excerpt from the Music-Drama (Myanmar ‘Opera’) by Shwe Man Tin Maung
Tin Maung San Min Win, *Mintha*; Shwe Joe Jar, San Shwe Sin, Saw Yu Nwe,
Minthamee Ensemble

Intermission

9. Khit Thon Khit Hni Pa Thwa (The Royal Duet and Pledges of Loyalty: Dance From Three Eras)

A. Myay Waing Khit (Ground Circle Zat Thabin Era 1870’s)

Shwe Man Win Maung, *Mintha*; Shwe Joe Jar, *Minthamee*

B. A Linga Khit (A Linga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung’s Era 1930’s-1969)

Shwe Man Chan Thar, *Mintha*, San Shwe Sin, *Minthamee*

C. Ya Ne Khit (Contemporary Times)

Tin Maung San Min Win, *Mintha*; *Minthamee* Ensemble

D. Lu Shwin Taw Pa Ri Hkan (Comedians’ Introduction for Hna Pa Thwa)

Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, *Mintha* Clowns

E. Mintha A Swan Pya (Virtuosic Display of the Mintha)

San Min Aung, *Mintha* and *Minthamee* Ensemble

F. Lu Shwin Taw Hatha (Joking of the Comedians)

Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, *Mintha* Clowns

G. Mintha and Minthamee A Ka (Dance of the Mintha and Minthamee)

San Min Aung, *Mintha* and *Minthamee* Ensemble

H. Lu Shwin Taw Hatha (Joking of the Comedians)

Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, *Mintha* Clowns

I. “Wat Lat” Son Twe Mintha Paun Su A Ka (Trio Couples Dance in Wa Lat Tempo)

All *Mintha* and *Minthamee* Couples

10. “Aung Ba Sei” (May Success Be Yours)

Composer: Al Saya Hnya

Sa Hkan Thein (Zat Pwe Finale)

Shwe Man Thabin Company

11. Mingala Pwe Thein Byaw (Instrumental Postlude and Farewell)

Thiri Maung Maung Shwe Ta Sait Hsaing Waing

Thiri Maung Maung (Pat Waing Saya - drum circle leader)

Ne Lin (Hne Saya - (oboe leader))

Sein Win Ko (Kyay Waing - knobbed gong circle)

Way Yan Maung Maung (maung -gong set)

Kyi Than (Pat Ma Gyi, Kyauk Lon Bat- Large Drums)

San Sint Maung Maung (Oht Son - Rhythm Section)

Nge Naung (Si Wa Cymbal and Clapper Time Markers)

Shwe Man Thabin Program Notes
By Kit Young with Ne Myo Aung
Gitameit Music Center

About Zat Pwe:

Zat in Burmese refers to the *jatakas* tales, the 550 stories from India of the Buddha's earlier incarnations that serve to instruct moral behavior. 15th century accounts suggest that marionettes, not human performers, in both royal court and village life enlivened the *jataka* stories as public drama. Gradually, "zat" began to mean actors and actresses taking on the roles of marionette characters. New dramatic forms were added to the staging of the *jataka* tales.

Zat in Burmese language also refers to a troupe of performers (*a hpwet*) and an all-night, outdoor performance (*pwe*). Usually, these performances take place on the grounds adjoining a temple during particular Buddhist festivals and holidays. In today's Myanmar, very few *zat thabin* troupes can survive the enormous cost of maintaining a large troupe and touring schedule.

The culture, history and artistic languages of *zat* are known as *zat thabin*: the world of *zat* theater reflecting Myanmar, past and present.

About Shwe Man Thabin Zat Pwe:

Shwe Man Thabin (Golden Mandalay Theater) *zat* troupe was founded in 1933 by *Alinga Kyaw Swa* (Performer Laureate) Shwe Man Tin Maung, a renowned performer known for his innovation within the traditions of the classical *zat pwe*. The troupe continues today through the perseverance and talents of his sons and daughters, and now, his grandchildren. Each is a nationally and internationally recognized performing artist in their own sphere, well versed in the skills of a *zat* performer: dancing, acting, singing, and improvised speaking, as well as writing, directing and producing plays. Shwe Man Thabin is the last of the family dynasties to remain in the *zat* performance community, and celebrated their 80th anniversary in 2013. Today's Shwe Man Thabin has two touring *zat* troupes in Myanmar: Shwe Man Chan Thar, son of *Alinga Kyaw Swa* Shwe Man Tin Maung directs one troupe and Tin Maung San Min Win, the grandson of Shwe Man Tin Maung and directs the other troupe.

Program Notes:

Ta Khaing Lon Shwe (The Spray of Golden Flowers)

U Han Ba (1888-1966), Composer

A Sa Ti Lon: (Hsaing Waing Music Opening Tonight's zat pwe)

An all-night, outdoor *zat pwe* opens with an instrumental prelude, known as *a ti lon* alerting the audience that the *zat pwe* is starting. Tonight, Shwe Man Thabin opens their program with "*Ta Khaing Lon Shwe*" (The Spray of Golden Flowers), by celebrated composer U Han Ba. The song's lyrics are about golden flower sprays such as the "*badauk*," sparkling in trees and showering delight and good luck. This is peculiarly true of their blooming season in April, which marks the New Year. It is celebrated in the *Thingyan* water festival (in 2015 this festival begins on April 14th).

1. *Phaya Gadaw Hkan* (Invocation Prayer to the Buddha)

A. *Si Mi Kwet A Ka* (Candlelight Cup Dance)

In *Zat Thabin* (theater) and older *Yok Thay Thabin* (Marionette Theater) traditions, performers invoke a prayer to the Buddha at the start of the *pwe*. They make a candlelight offering to the Buddha and perform dances propitiating a pantheon of deities in Myanmar known as “*Nats*,” which ensures that nothing untoward will happen in the *pwe*. The *hsaing waing* accompanies the performers during their singing of “*Htu Ma Chana*.” *Htu Ma Chana* (The Incomparable Buddha) was composed by Myawaddy U Sa, a gifted minister of the Konbaung Dynasty (early 1800’s). The song uses a classical-style structure of “*Thakyin Kan*” from a great canon of centuries-old song genres collectively known as the “*Mahagita*.” The lyrics of these old songs are primarily secular. In some song genres however, lyrics praising the Buddha are used on occasions for lay worship and shared in the theater.

Si Mi Kwet A Ka (Candlelight Cup Dance) is a Buddhist offertory which is performed by a *minthamee* (“princess” in the Myanmar language, also a female dancer/actress) during the playing of the song *Htu Ma Chana*.

B. *Pwe Taw Hmyauk* (Raising up the Golden Bowl of Offerings to the *Nat* Spirit)

The original, royal court version of the *A Pyo Taw* (Royal Maiden) dance gradually evolved into a series of refined movements associated with the Burmese *A Nyeint*, a form of *minthamee* dance with singing and dialogue popular after the fall of the Konbaung dynasty in 1885. As *zat thabin* troupes proliferated in the 20th century, some of these earlier gestures merged with those familiar to both rural and urban audiences from trance-dancers *Nat Gadaw* in a *Nat pwe*.

C. *Hpakant Min Pu Zaw* (Propitiating)

In Myanmar’s *zat thabin*, a performance must begin with a prayer for the Buddha’s blessing. According to Buddhist beliefs, this has been a custom for audiences and performers. *Zat thabin* performers must pay respect to the Buddha first with an offering of candles and flowers and then to the *Nat* spirits. From this propitiation, the performance will proceed smoothly, with no accidents, and dancers will come to the stage with right focus. *Nat* spirits at all cardinal points of the universe must receive praise with offerings of a coconut, bananas, auspicious eugenia flowers, candles, and perfume. This presentation and the accompanying graceful dance is performed by a *minthamee* in the “*Pwe Taw Hmyauk A Pyo Taw*.” To gain the blessing of the powerful and macho *Ko Gyi Kyaw Nat*, a *mintha* (“Prince” in the Myanmar language, also dancer/actor) and *minthamee* enter to the cascading cymbal and drum beats of “*Hpakant Min Pu Zaw*” (Offering to the King of *Hpakant*) following the *A Pyo Taw* dance. This is a more vigorous dance to honor *Ko Gyi Kyaw*, one of the patron *Nats* for performing artists. Dancers offer their symbolic trance ecstasy to *Ko Gyi Kyaw* miming gestures from the *Nat pwe* of drinking, eating, and smoking, to enter into communion with the *Nat* so as to calm him and have him bless the night’s performance.

2. *Hna Ko Hkwe Myaing Hta* (The Royal Duet in a Sylvan Setting)

This duet dance between *mintha* and *minthamee*, informally referred to as “*Myaing Hta*” in the world of *zat thabin*, is a dance with *hsaing waing* accompaniment derived from a longer, extended form of dialogue, singing, and clown commentary called “*Hna Pa Thwa*” occurring at the end of the night at a *zat pwe*. The *mintha* and *minthamee* must demonstrate their gracefulness on stage, show deep emotion in the dance and show intricacy in their duet steps and *let cho*—the language and delicacy of hand gestures.

Two of the most famous *minthas* of the early twentieth century, U Aung Bala and U Sein Gadon, danced the *Myaing Hta* in the days when a *mintha* and *minthamee* were not allowed any physical contact on stage. The graceful performer U Aung Bala became famous for his dancing of *minthamee* roles and singing *Ngo Kyin* (Weeping Songs) in a high-pitched voice in duet with *mintha* U Sein Gadon dancing the role of the royal prince. Chan Thar as a soloist dances both *mintha* and *minthamee* roles in his choreography for Shwe Man Thabin. (*i*)

The *Myaing Hta* is said by certain commentators in Myanmar to have originated from duet forest scene dances in the Thai *Ramakien* and *Inao* dramas which together with stage music were absorbed into a Burmese idiom by the royal courts in the *Inwa* and early *Konbaung* dynasty (ca. late 1700’s-early 1800’s). The songs accompanying *Myaing Hta* are called “*Yodaya*” Burmese language for the Thai capital Ayudhya) and played in a distinctly calming style with a mode and timing specific for the genre. The Burmese lyrics for these songs frequently describe the beauty of the forest and longing for a lost or missing love.

Shwe Man Thabin’s founder *Alinga Kyaw Swa* Shwe Man Tin Maung (1918-1969) originally danced the “*Hni Ko Kwe Myaing Hta*” during one of his most popular operas, *Hle Tha Ngaya*. In this story, a merchant on his route across a great desert with 500 wagon-carts of goods and travelers arranges entertainment at a rest stop for his passengers. In this scene, *Alinga Kyaw Swa* Shwe Man Tin Maung inserted the “*Hna Ko Myaing Hta*” dance with an innovation that audiences loved. He at first dances the *mintha* role and then, behind a lowered curtain on stage, he changes costume, while music plays, and emerges seconds later, dressed as a *minthamee* and dances with female gestures. The scene derives from a fabled scene of a prince and princess who finish their Buddhist studies at Taxila University (in the Punjab). On their journey home, in the forest, the princess tires and while they rest, the prince declares his undying devotion to her in song and dance. Supporting dancers are the stage audience watching the couple from the Opera “*Hle Tha Ngaya*.”

3. *Sagaing Byaw* (Byaw Tune from *Sagaing*, composed by A-1 Saya Hnya)

The *Sagaing Byaw* tune and accompanying dance are examples of *Alinga Kyaw Swa*, Shwe Man U Tin Maung’s many and fruitful collaborations with composer A-1 Saya Hnya. In Myanmar’s merit-making and alms-giving ceremonies in the central plains city of Sagaing, the exciting music of the gongs paired with clashing cymbals encourages townspeople to make merit by donating to temple projects.

4. *Kyei Let Pyaing Pwe* (Folk Dance Medley and Competition)

Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung not only choreographed traditional dances but also performed dances with different village customs, one being a competition dance. In this scene, a maiden from a central village watches the talents of two young male dancers vying for top place, egged on by jokes and the *hsaing waing*'s breathless passagework.

5. *Htamein Na Hke A Ka* (The Flicking of the *Htamein* Skirt's White Train Dance)

A *minthamee* in the *A Nyeint* dancing tradition wears an exaggerated stage version of a Burmese woman's *aingyi* (a blouse with fluted wings) matched with a *htamein* (a traditional skirt with a long white train). The *minthamee* as a dancer must know how to use the hem of the costume's long train for artistic effect. This ability was crucial for the earlier days of *minthamee* performance. The *minthamee* must carefully use her ankles and feet to flick the hem of the train sideways, upwards and to the back. This precision is closely watched and felt by musicians who must accent the "swish" of the long cloth train.

6. *Yok Thay A Ka* (The Dance of the Marionettes)

The Marionette tradition, with its unique properties and meaning in Myanmar culture, extends back to early kingdoms of Pagan period. In 702 CE, during the T'ang Dynasty in China, and Pyu Kingdom in Myanmar, a troupe of *Pyu* (*P'iao* in Mandarin) musicians and dancers traveled to perform at the Xian Court. Poet Yuan Wei-chih noted in one poem that when the *Pyu* dancers moved: "their limbs and joints became tense and stiffened...bending to the right and left, they danced as though being intoxicated with the wine of music." He cautioned that "even if you kneel down on the ground and pray to Heaven, you will never learn *Pyu* music and dance." (ii)

Especially significant is the reciprocal dance relationship between human and Marionette movements that was developed over centuries at the royal courts where *yok thay pwe* (marionette performances) were the "high status" theater form. To imitate the marionettes, dancers would adjust in sequenced pauses; their limbs would hang as if from strings; their body timing and geography would come to resemble jointed motion, learning to fall into a collapse and then suddenly rising as if on attached strings. To accentuate this "jointed" timing, musicians would play in an abrupt style called '*pat hsit kyo*' (jointed string drum strokes) for these movements. The *mintha* who specializes in this imitation must study not only the marionette *mintha*, but the manipulation motions of the puppeteer, so that the illusion of a true marionette *mintha* and his master can entrance an audience.

7. *San Taw Kyein Ti Lon Hnin Mintha Yein* (Proclamation Music and *Mintha* Group Dance)

Of all the melodies in the *hsaing waing* repertoire, audiences in Myanmar recognize the "*San Taw Kyein*" instrumental *hsaing waing* melody made famous in the 1950's as the theme song to announce the time for the government radio stations BBS (now MRTV). It was composed by the great *Hsaing Saya* and colleague of Shwe Man Tin Maung, Sein Ba Maung Kalei. Four *mintha* dancers join to form the "*A Yein*" group dance. Shwe Man Thabin takes pride in having originally commissioned the *San Taw Kyein* through Shwe Man Tin Maung's request for a group dance tune from Sein Ba Maung Kalei.

8. *Man Nat Hnin Thami Thon Paw* (Mara Sends His Three Daughters to Tempt the Meditating Buddha)

Excerpt from the Musical Dance-Drama (Myanmar “*Awpara*”) “Opera” by Founder, *Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung*

Mara, The King of Evil, forever tries to dissuade and tempt the Buddha away from enlightenment. In this scene, Mara’s three daughters represent the Delight of Deceit, the Delight of Scent and the Traps of Earthly Illusions. Their attempt to distract the Buddha in his meditation is to no avail. The Buddha attains *Nirvana*, thereby dissolving Mara’s web of earthly attachments and desires.

Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung, founder of *Shwe Man Thabin* created a music dance-drama form for *zat pwe* that became a vehicle both for dramatic settings of the Jataka tales (stories from the Buddha’s life) and for dramatizations from Burmese history with music and dance. Each production would feature stagecraft new to Burmese audiences in that era. *Shwe Man Tin Maung*, on a US State Department visit to the United States in 1957, saw several Broadway musicals which inspired his development of the *Zat Thabin “Awpara” (Opera)*. Of the *apwaras*, *Man Nat Hnin Thami Thon Paw* is extremely beloved among *Shwe Man Thabin* audiences.

9. *Khít Thon Khít Hna Pa Thwa* (The Royal Duet, Their Pledges of Devotion: Dance from Three Eras)

A. *Myay Waing Khít* (Ground Circle *Zat Thabin* ca. 1870’s)

The *hsaing waing* starts with a rhythm pattern of the *ozi* (long *Shan* drum). The gifted *mintha* and *minthamee* appear in old costumes with *han* (expressions) from an early era. At that time, no physical contact was allowed between *mintha* and *minthamee* who danced on the ground in the open air in front of a traveling cart.

B. *A Linga Khít* (A *Linga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung*’s era 1930’s - 1969)

In the post-WW II era, the *Hna Pa Thwa* portion of the *Zat Pwe* became a testing ground for the young *mintha* wanting to impress a *Zat Saya* (*Zat Company Director*) in order to get hired. There were many troupes, and audiences got restless with old routines. They began to clamor for more contemporary stories, humor and new performing ideas, particularly when film started to become stiff competition for *zat thabin* in cities and large townships. The popular styles from the era of *Mintha U Po Sein* (1920’s, 1930’s) were enlivened with new dialogues, songs, sets, and stage antics with clowns. *Shwe Man Tin Maung*’s great genius was to combine classical forms and the virtuosic skills of his dancers’ singing and traditional dancing with more spontaneous improvised movement. He constantly created new works during their Monsoon season rehearsals for the following year’s tour, stating: “I will work until I die to show the middle class that *zat thabin* is relevant.” In 1969, at the age of 50, *Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung* died on stage dancing the *Hna Pa Thwa* with two of his sons in supporting roles. (iii)

C. *Ya Ne Khit* (Contemporary Times)

New times in Myanmar bring new dances and singing, digital set design, dub-step and rock bands to the stage of *Zat Thabin* as tour managers compete for younger audiences to attend *Zat pwe* in the countryside. For Shwe Man Thabin, contemporary and traditional blend smoothly as the *Hna Pa Thwa* transitions to contemporary stage singing and classical dance leads to occasional rock music beats from the *hsaing waing*.

D. *Lu Shwin Taw Pa Ri Hkan* (Comedians' Prelude in the Hnit Ba Thwa Scene)

E. *Mintha A Swan Pya* (Virtuosic Dance of the *Mintha* and *Minthamee* Ensemble)

F. *Lu Shwin Taw Hatha 1* (Joking of the Comedians)

G. *Mintha and Minthamee A Ka* (Dance of the *Mintha* and *Minthamee*)

H. *Lu Shwin Taw Hatha 2* (Joking of the Comedians)

I. *Wat Lat Son Dtwe Mintha Paun A Ka* (Trio Couples Dance to the *Hsaing Waing's* Exciting Beats)

The *Hna Pa Thwa* moment, a synthesis of dancing, singing, dialogue and stand-up comedy, clowning and instrumental music, is performed as the last number in the all-night *zat pwe*. It brings up the sun, returns the audiences from the magic, wonder and stories of the night to their daily realities.

For decades, Burmese writers on *Zat Thabin* have devoted countless chapters in books and articles to analyzing the *Hna Pa Thwa*—tracing its origins, commenting on the songs which announce the scene and the *Minthas* who best exemplify “*yatha thingaya, yatha hatha*” (an aesthetic of expressing passion balanced with undying devotion with an engaging gentleness and humor). The original dramatic scene of the royal couple strolling, singing and “troth-plighting” no longer proceeds according to script. Instead, improvisation of dialogue, music, song, mime and dance are the astounding stage versions of sparkling, golden beads on a *Kalaga* (tapestry from Myanmar) or a rich wooden temple carving. The *mintha* and *minthamee* ensemble performances balance the sublime with the ridiculous, provided by comedians. *Metta Garuna* (compassion) and other moral teachings of the Buddha are grounded in everyday experiences by the antics of the clowns, delighting all generations of audiences. (iv)

At a *Zat pwe*, the usual running time of the *Hna Pa Thwa* is two hours. Dancers tire easily from their multiple roles on stage. Talented comedians know when a dancer is tired, needs to catch breath or rest and will interrupt a dance number with mime or dialogue with the *hsaing waing Saya* or “*Nauk Hta,*” in which a comedian and/or musician send back verbal or musical retorts and challenges to performers on stage. The *minthamee* ensemble chorus often responds to the song repertoire of the *mintha*, as they comment on the *mintha's* virtues and the *mintha* comments on the beauty and talent of each *minthamee* all the while answering the joking of the clowns. (v)

11. “Aung Ba Sei” (May Success Be Yours) *Sa Hkan Thein* (Zat Pwe Finale)

Composer: *A1 Saya Hnya*

A closing song by A1 Saya Hnya, made famous in recording by *Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung* and a signature song for celebrations in *Zat Thabin*, as well as many other occasions for toasting to success.

12. *Mingala Pwe Thein Byaw* (Instrumental Performance Postlude and Farewell)

Thiri Maung Maung and the Shwe Ta Zait Hsaing Ensemble

References:

i Ludu Daw Amah, “Shwe Man Tin Maung”, Ludu Press, Mandalay, 1970

ii Tang Yi Sein, Journal of Research in Myanmar History Vol.1, 1977, Vol.2, 1978 and Vol.3, 1979

iii Ludu Daw Amah, Op. cit

iv U Chit Oo Nyo, “Lawka Zat Hkon, Zat Hkon Lawka, (The World a Stage, The Stage a World), Yadana Bon Sa Oht Taik, 1996, Yangon

v Shwe Man Win Maung, personal communication, 2013

**Shwe Man Thabin Zat Troupes
Performers**

Directors

Shwe Man Chan Thar

Tin Maung San Min Win

With

Shwe Man Win Maung,

Troupe

*Saw Yu New, San Shwe Sin, San Min Aung,
Sein Win Ko, Chit Swan Thar, Awra Aung, Joe Jar*

Thiri Maung Maung and the *Shwe Da Zait Hsaing Waing Ensemble:*

Thiri Maung Maung (Pat waing Saya - drum circle leader)

Ne Lin (Hne Saya - (oboe leader))

Win Ko (Kyay Waing - knobbed gong circle)

Way Yan Maung Maung (maung -gong set)

Gyi Than (Pat Ma Kyi, Kyauk Lon Bat- Large Drums)

San Sint Maung Maung (Oht Son - Rhythm Section)

Yay Aung (Si Wa Cymbal and Clapper Time Markers)

Biographies:

Shwe Man Chan Thar, *Mintha*

Shwe Man Chan Thar, born in 1959, is the youngest son of *Alinga Kyaw Swa* (Performer Laureate) Shwe Man U Tin Maung. He learned to dance and sing with his father, brothers and the instructors of the Shwe Man Thabin troupe. A stellar dancer, choreographer, singer, actor, film actor and playwright, Shwe Man Chan Thar's gifts have brought him national and international acclaim as the most prominent *mintha* performing today on Myanmar's *zat thabin* stage.

After his older brothers retired in the late 1990s, Shwe Man Chan Thar became director of Shwe Man Thabin—a troupe which includes 70 dancers, comedians, musicians, and stage hands. They tour Myanmar extensively during an eight month season from September to early April. He is known for his extraordinary dance performances during the *Hna Pa Thwa* (the final number in a *zat pwe*); his choreography of group dances; and his skills a director as a great *zat thabin mintha*. He has captivated Myanmar audiences of all social classes since he was young. His troupe in smaller ensemble has performed in Singapore, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Shwe Man Chan Thar's excitement from new collaborations and ideas for the stage began with inspiration from his father, as well as exposure to the Martha Graham Company at a young age, when he saw their performance on their tour to Myanmar in 1974. In 1997, Shwe Man Chan Thar participated in the UCLA Intercultural Pacific Rim Performance Program collaborating with other artists from Asia and the US. In 2005, Yangon's first contemporary multi-media collaborative theater work at Gitameit Music Center, "*Nya-La-Ka*" based on the poetry of Nyein Way and sponsored by the Asian Cultural Council featured Shwe Man Chan Thar both as a *mintha* and modern experimental dancer inspired by *hsaing waing*, chorus, narration and video. Shwe Man Chan Thar brought Thai dancer Pichet Klunchun to the Shwe Man Thabin *zat pwe* stage in the Insein township of Yangon for one night in 2010 to the astonishment and delight of Myanmar audiences: it was the first time in twenty years that any international guest had performed in a *zat pwe*. They performed a duet based on the Thai and Burmese characterizations of the Demon King Ravana (Totsagan in Thai, Dathagiri in Burmese) from the Ramayana epic.

In his role as director, Shwe Man Chan Thar constantly seeks ways to incorporate stage innovations, techniques, dramatic plots, and new songs that will appeal to his audiences. His great popularity among rural audiences is as strong as in his father's era. Yet the conundrum of losing appeal among middle class audiences is always a challenge for the future plans for Shwe Man Thabin.

In August of 2013, Shwe Man Chan Thar, his family, and invited distinguished performing artists commemorated the 80th Anniversary of the founding of Shwe Man Thabin by *Alinga Kyaw Swa* Shwe Man Tin Maung. The traditional length of a pagoda festival *zat pwe* is three nights. Anniversary performances took place for three nights at the National Theater in Yangon to a full house each night. The *zat pwe* nights were nationally broadcast and streamed on internet to Burmese audiences around the world by MRTV 4. Songs, dances, opera and Jataka stories, comic routines created by Shwe Man Tin Maung from the Post-WW II period were brought back to the stage. These performances initiated revived interest and pride among audiences in Myanmar, many of whom had never been to a *zat pwe*.

Shwe Man Win Maung, *Mintha*

Mintha Shwe Man Win Maung, born in 1954, studied with his father and the circle of instructors around Shwe Man Thabin. Before coming to live in the United States in 1989, Shwe Man Win Maung performed on the Shwe Man Thabin *Zat pwe* performing circuit in Myanmar with his older brothers Nyunt Win, Win Bo, and San Win. Shwe Man Win Maung has taught dance in the American-Burmese community, sung for benefit concerts in the United States and specializes in dancing *Yama*, from the Myanmar version of the Ramayana. Shwe Man Win Maung was Assistant Professor of Dance at Denison University in 2009, and has worked at Lotus Music and Dance in New York City as a teacher and video editor since 1993. In 1991, Win Maung performed a concert by the Society for Asian Music accompanied by Kit Young, *sandaya* (Burmese piano) and Lili Kya Nyunt at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, introducing Burmese traditional songs to new audiences and the Burmese community. Win Maung sang and danced his *Mintha* roles with his family in the Shwe Man Thabin 80th anniversary celebrations in 2013 and 2014 in Yangon and Mandalay. Shwe Man Win Maung lives in New York City.

Tin Maung San Min Win, *Mintha*

Zat Thabin Mintha Tin Maung San Min Win, the son of Shwe Man San Win, grandson of *Alinga Kyaw Swa* (Performer Laureate) Shwe Man Win Maung and a national performing star was born in 1977 in Yangon. His debut as a *Mintha* was in 1998, after which he twice won the Myanmar Government's National Arts Competition (So-Ka-Ye-Ti) Gold Medal for his classical dancing.

Tin Maung San Min Win directs a second troupe of Shwe Man Thabin. His uncle, Shwe Man Chan Thar directs his father's original troupe. His ensemble of clowns is equally fluent in traditional comic roles and as performers of current Myanmar break-dance and hip-hop. Tin Maung San Min Win has performed on 6 tours to the United States, as well as tours to England, Australia, Singapore and Thailand. In the United States, he performed at Asia Society in 2003 and at Myanmar community shows in Los Angeles and other cities. His work and ensembles were sponsored by the French and Malaysian Embassies, The Thai-Myanmar Friendship Association, ASEAN and SEAGAMES.

Tin Maung San Min Win amazed audiences in Yangon with his dancing, acting and singing at the National Theater in Yangon in August, 2013 at the three night celebration: The 80th Anniversary of *Alinga Kyaw Swa* Shwe Man Win Maung's Shwe Man Thabin *Zat* Troupe.

San Min Aung, *Mintha*

San Min Aung's dancing art and virtuosic stage performances in the Shwe Man Thabin *Zat* troupe of Tin Maung San Min Win astound audiences everywhere. San Min Aung graduated from the Mandalay School of Fine and Dramatic Arts in 2010. He received a gold medal from the Myanmar Government in the National Arts Competition (So-Ka-Ye-Ti) in 2008 with the Tin Maung San Min Win Shwe Man Thabin *Zat* troupe. The Asia Society performances will be his debut in the United States.

Thiri Maung Maung, *Hsaing Saya*

Myanmar *Shwe Ta Sait hsaing waing* percussion ensemble *hsaing saya* (leader) Thiri Maung Maung's extraordinary talent as virtuoso *pat waing* player and composer is known throughout Myanmar. The Myanmar government's National Arts Competition (So- Ka-Ye-Ti) awarded Thiri Maung Maung 19 gold medals since 1994 in solo, ensemble and dramatic categories. Thiri Maung Maung has performed in Singapore, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States with Shwe Man Chan Thar. Born in 1966, Thiri Maung Maung's studies with well-known *hsaing* teacher *Sein Bo Tint*, *Ma Hlaing Than Htun*, *U Law Shae* and *U Sein Hla*, gave him a firm foundation in all aspects of a great legacy of *hsaing waing* leadership, improvisation and composition. Thiri Maung Maung performed with Shwe Man Chan Thar, Shwe Man Win Maung, Thomas Buckner and Kit Young in 2007 at the Alvin Ailey studios in New York City and in 2010 at the Burmese Arts Festival in London. His knowledge of repertoire for "Zat Taw Gyi", performance of the Jataka tales earned him many accolades from newspaper accounts and the Ministry of Culture. Thiri Maung Maung has more than 20 commercial recordings and videos of his troupe "*Thiri Maung Maung*."

Ne Lin, *Hne Saya* (Master Oboist)

Ne Lin, beginning his *hne* studies at the age of nine, received 21 gold, 8 silver and 5 bronze medals in different categories of instrumental playing from the Myanmar Government National Arts Competition (So-Ka-Ye-Ti) which was instituted in the mid-1990s. He is a professional *Hne Saya* performing primarily with the "Thiri Maung Maung *Shwe Ta Sait*" *hsaing waing*. His professional engagements have taken him to England, Germany, the Netherlands and France at the National Theater in Yangon to a full house each night. The *Zat pwe* nights were nationally broadcast and streamed on internet to Burmese audiences around the world by MRTV 4. Songs, dances, opera and Jataka stories, comic routines created by Shwe Man Tin Maung from the Post-WW II period were brought back to the stage. These performances initiated revived interest and pride among audiences in Myanmar, many of whom had never been to a *zat pwe*.

U Aye Swe, Manager of US Tour of Shwe Man Thabin

Shwe Man Thabin Zat Manager was born in 1954 in Mandalay. He graduated from the St. John Diocese High School and went into the film industry as an actor from 1971-1985. He married Daw Khin Chit Win, daughter of Shwe Man Tin Maung and later, started working with Shwe Man Thabin as Manager while maintaining his own small gems business. U Aye Swe lives in Yangon with his family.

Kit Young, Co-founder and Artistic Advisor, Gitameit Music Center

Kit Young returned in 2012 to Washington, DC from twenty years living in Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar and China where her husband was posted to US Embassies and she pursued a career as a solo and collaborative pianist and improviser/composer. Ms. Young's absorption in particularly Thai and Burmese music originates from her childhood living in Thailand studying Thai instruments, and a lifelong quest to answer the question of how to hear and perform music from another culture, informing one's own musical trajectory. Since 1987, Ms. Young studied the Burmese Sandaya tradition: Burmese traditional music styles performed on the piano. She worked with Myanmar/Burma's greatest composer and sandaya player, Gita Lulin U Ko Ko among others and has performed extensively with Burmese musicians and dancers. Her 1991 debut performances of Burmese music at New York's Metropolitan Museum and Symphony Space with Shwe Man Win Maung and others were broadcast to Burma by the Voice of America. In 2013, she performed with legendary Burmese Zat theater troupe "Shwe Man Thabin" in the National Theater in Yangon, Myanmar. From 1992 to 2003, Ms. Young taught on the piano faculties of Thai universities Sri Nakarin Wirot and Payap and recorded two cd's in Bangkok, TRI – violin and piano music of composers in Thailand and Akhanee Kita – improvisations with Nop Sotthibhandu.

In 2003, Ms. Young, founded with Burmese colleagues Gitameit Music Center (www.gitameit.com) with campuses in Yangon and Mandalay. Work with Burmese theater artists, poets and musicians led to her compositions for two collaborative theater-media productions awarded grants by the Asian Cultural Council: *Nya La Ka* and *The Monsters of Inya Lake*. Her songs setting the poetry of U San Oo for baritone and accompanying instruments were performed by Thomas Buckner and colleagues in San Francisco, Yangon, Beijing and New York in the "Interpretations" Series at Roulette. Her work *For the Real Question* with text by Vaclav Havel was performed by Gitameit Voices while on tour in the United States in 2009. While living in Beijing, China, Ms. Young formed an improvising duo with Wu Na, a classical and avant garde gu qin player exploring modalities of extended piano techniques, and T'ang dynasty repertoire. The Thai Embassy in Beijing sponsored Ms. Young and Wu Na to perform concerts in Beijing and Hang Zhou with Thai modern dancer Pichet Klunchon in 2011. Ms. Young composed music for a Chinese production of Harold Pinter's "Betrayal" directed by Li Jiang Jun for the third China Fringe Festival in 2010 and was a member of the Beijing New Music Ensemble from 2009 to 2011. Another grant in 2011 from Asian Cultural Council funded concerts by American, Myanmar/Burmese musicians and Chinese musicians performing new works at the Beijing National Center for Performing Arts, Central Conservatory and at Western Academy Beijing where Ms. Young taught from 2009 -2011. Kit Young with Chaw Ei Thein, Susan Galbraith devised "*Sandaya: Burmese Lessons*" – a new music theater workshop piece on July, 2013 at the Atlas Theater in Washington D.C.

May Zaw Khin, Translator

A native of Myanmar, May Zaw is a frequent guest speaker on the US radio news programs and at international conferences worldwide, some of which organized by Nobel Women Initiative, Asia Journalists Association (Seoul), Parley Center, Diane Rim Show on WAMU, Channel News Asia, Swiss International High School (Thailand), and International Center for Journalists. She is also the author of "How to Arrange and Write Research Papers: A Manual for Academic Writing and Publishing," the only manual published for Burmese scholars on the topic.

Glossary of Burmese Terms

Mintha, Minthamee

Mintha means 'prince,' *minthamee* means 'princess' in the Burmese language. Both terms are also used for performers who act on stage and in movies. The *zat thabin mintha* and *minthamee* must train in singing, dancing, acting, recitation, improvised dialogue, choreography and sometimes the writing of short skits and plays.

Hna Pa Thwa

Hna Pa Thwa is the last presentation in an all-night *zat pwe*, involving improvised sequences of dance, singing, dialogue, clowning and music. There is no plot to these pieces, but they are based on an older dance and dramatic conceit involving the betrothal of a fabled prince and princess. This scenario was used as a vehicle for Buddhist teachings about compassion and devotion.

Yok Thay

Yok Thay means "a suspended figure," i.e. a puppet on strings. The Marionette Theater reached its glory in the 19th century and was popular particularly in Upper Burma until middle of the 20th century. The Myanmar Ministry of Culture supports some teaching of new puppeteers at two government college level schools of culture and dramatic arts. However, performances are rare among the general public, except in the case of two troupes who organize shows for tourists in Mandalay and Yangon, in an effort to preserve what is nearly an obsolete art form.

Hsaing Waing

An extraordinary ensemble in Myanmar of primarily double and single sided drums, both pitched and non-pitched: large gongs, small pitched knobbed gongs, cymbals and a piercing double reed oboe. The player of the *pat waing* - a set of 21 tunable drums strung on a circle of panels - leads the *hsaing waing* followed closely in melody by the player of the oboe (*hne*). *Hsaing waing* music in a *Zat pwe* frequently engages in dialogue with performers on stage, introduces song themes, supports the gestures of the dancers with exquisite timing, maintains, propels, and relaxes tempos to sudden stops, silence and sudden new phrases.

Ti Lon

An instrumental version of a song or a virtuosic musical number in the case of tonight's performance, played by the *hsaing waing*.

The All-Night *Zat Pwe*

By *Kit Young*, Co-founder and Artistic Advisor, *Gitameit Music Center*

1. Introduction

A *zat pwe* in Myanmar is a popular all-night outdoor theater performance that began in the late 1800's, and has continued in Burmese history through the present. An evening of *zat pwe* presents a panoply of music, song, dance, drama, and comedy all led by a male stage star known as a *mintha*, accompanied by his female counterpart, a *minthamee*, and an ensemble of clowns. The music of the *hsaing waing* (a traditional percussion-gong-oboe ensemble in Myanmar) is integral to every moment on stage. A *zat pwe* continues all night, ending with the first rays of the morning sun.

The *zat pwe* blends cultural and historical elements gathered from a variety of sources: from the legacies of dance in the old royal courts, to marionette theater traditions, to the Buddhist teachings of the *jataka* tales, to contemporary dramatic plays addressing social issues such as drug addiction, family crises and corruption, and clowns who use humor to address risqué local politics and gossip. As part of a living tradition, it has come to seamlessly incorporate these elements of both old and new influences, spanning the breadth of Myanmar culture to incorporate tradition and religion with modern day realities.

2. The *Zat Pwe* and *Shwe Man Thabin*: Origins

Myanmar's population, cultures and languages are diverse, with the *Bama* or Burmans, making up 68% of the population, forming the majority ethnic and linguistic group. Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion of the Burmans. Myanmar also has a pre-Buddhist Animist tradition that worships a pantheon of spirits each referred to as a "*Nat*." *Nat* worship is often incorporated into Buddhist practice in Myanmar, as is illustrated within the context of *zat pwe*, where performers make offerings first to the Buddha to cultivate mindfulness, and then to a *Nat* who, when propitiated, will bless them with a successful performance. The *zat pwe* takes place within the context of religious ceremonies. They are sometimes sponsored by donors in the community who wish to gain merit by hiring troupes for Buddhist Pagoda festivals.

Zat in Burmese refers to the *jatakas*, the 550 stories from India of the Buddha's earlier incarnations that serve to instruct moral behavior. *Zat* in Burmese also refers to a troupe of performers and an all-night outdoor variety show performance (*pwe*). The culture, history and artistic languages of *zat* are known as '*zat thabin*': the world of *zat* theater which reflects the culture of Myanmar, past and present.

The *zat pwe* format was modeled on marionette theater (*yok thay pwe*) and became the human expression of marionettes dramatizing the *jataka* tales. Marionettes were the dramatic characters narrating the Buddhist *jatakas* in both the royal court, as well as among subjects. In the late 18th century, the court issued edicts about high and low drama: high drama was the telling of *jatakas* with music by marionettes, whereas human dancers were relegated to low drama. (*i*)

As *zat thabin* actors and dancers took on the characters from marionette *jataka* dramas, some of the movements of the marionettes were exaggerated through human imitation, and embellished by elegant royal court dance classical movements of great early 20th century dancers such as Aung Bala, Sein Gadon and Po Sein. Audiences were enraptured by the intimately familiar marionette movements and tempos: the stylized gestures imitating the jerkiness of puppets; stiff hands; the human “marionette” crashing to the floor at a coda; and female dancers kicking a trailing white train with their feet. The close relationship in movement styles between classical Myanmar dance and the long tradition of marionettes in Myanmar have merited much commentary over centuries. (ii)

In fact, as far back as 802 C.E., during the Pyu Kingdom in Myanmar, a troupe of Pyu (*P'iao* in Mandarin) musicians and dancers traveled to perform at the Xian Court in T'ang Dynasty China. Lively descriptions of the dance were recorded by Chinese scribes, whose reports of the movements were strikingly similar to the Myanmar dancers of today. One poet present at the performances wrote a poem with a description of the dancers: “bending to the right and left, they danced as though being intoxicated with the wine of music.” He cautioned that “even if you kneel down on the ground and pray to Heaven, you will never learn Pyu music and dance.” (iii)

After Burma fell to British rule in 1885, some royal court performers in Mandalay lost royal patronage, and began to join existing small *zat thabin* troupes who were performing *jataka* tales with two or three musicians. They would perform in an “earth circle” (*myay waing*), a cleared out space in front of bullock carts that toured the countryside performing in villages and at pagoda fairs. The addition of the royal court puppeteers, musicians, and dancers to the existing country troupes added a level of expertise, repertoire and excitement. The performances evolved into a multi-discipline theater form with performers balancing many skills from the old marionette *pwe*: music, dancing, singing, clowning, acting with emphasis on Buddhist moral teachings. The inclusive nature of *zat pwe* styles continues to expand, shaped also by the expectations of today’s audiences who keep up to date with the *zat* troupes through social media.

In the early 20th century—with more *zat* troupes touring Myanmar, and early ‘78 rpm song recordings popularizing *zat* performers—the allure of the most gifted *mintha* (Burmese word for ‘prince’ or actor; in this case, the principal dancer) and his more demure, female dancer partners called *minthamee*, together with talented comedians called *lu shwin taw*, were magnets for in a pre-film era audiences. After 1928, with the debut of Burma’s first film, both the *zat pwe* and smaller marionette troupes, *yok thay*, had to compete with the development of indoor cinema theaters in larger townships and cities.

The *zat pwe* renewed its popularity after the breakdown of public entertainment during WW II and Burmese Independence in 1948. *Zat thabin* troupes re-formed after the war and developed more traveling circuits in rural areas, cities and towns. Pagoda festivals in two cities—Mandalay and Bago—became centers for *zat* troupes to compete for attention. *Zat thabin* and the *hsaing waing* musicians, who brilliantly united disparate genres of dramatic performance, were championed and written about enthusiastically by Burmese writers, though occasionally cosmopolitan detractors criticized and dismissed *zat pwe* as being too “local” in cultural flavor.

Zat thabin's greatest advocate and dancer after World War II was *Mintha* Shwe Man Tin Maung who started his own troupe, **Shwe Man Thabin** in 1933. He brought international recognition and accolades to the music and dance of the *zat pwe*. His expansion of the final number in a *zat pwe*, the *hna ba thwa* became legendary, and the technical prowess of his dancers was the standout. Through his travels and exposure to international dance styles—for example, his seeing the Martha Graham Company's 1955 tour to Burma—he presented innovative choreography and directed new plays for each Shwe Man Thabin season. His genius was to combine classical forms with more spontaneous improvised movement, dialogue and socially relevant topics. He created a music dance-drama for *zat pwe* that became a vehicle both for the *jataka* tales and other Buddhist teachings, with dramatizations from Burmese history set to music and dance. Each production featured stagecraft new to Burmese audiences of the era. On a U.S. State Department-sponsored visit to the United States in 1957, he saw several Broadway musicals, inspiring his development of the *zat thabin* "*Awpara*" (*Opera*), a beloved and integral element of a night's *zat pwe*. (iv)

He also made great efforts to bridge the wide chasm in geographic and economic backgrounds of his audiences. He was well aware of the emerging urban middle-class contempt for *zat pwe*, as they were eager to embrace western art, drama and music. Particularly as more movie theaters opened, he was constantly challenged to modernize and revitalize the *zat pwe*. "I will work until I die to show the middle class that *zat thabin* is relevant." (v) In 1969, at the age of 50, while dancing with two of his sons in supporting roles, Shwe Man Tin Maung died on stage during the *hna ba thwa*, the final two hour segment of the *zat pwe*, where *minthas* dance, sing and declaim their virtues in improvised dialogue with *minthamee* and clowns through the frame of Buddhist teachings on devotion.

After Shwe Man Tin Maung's death, his *mintha* sons—film actor Nyunt Win, Win Bo, San Win, Win Maung and Chan Thar—all household names throughout Myanmar, continued to direct Shwe Man Thabin. They each contributed their unique talents to sustaining the troupe, while moving forward in dramatic and contemporary presentations, always mindful of their father's commitment to balancing high performance standards with changes in audiences' social and cultural expectations.

From the 1970's onward, local and regional military authorities issued directives and restrictions on the mobility and programming of *zat thabin* troupes as various insurgencies (particularly in the Mon, Kayin, Kayah, Shan, Kachin and Chin districts) gained ground in the countryside. Permissions for *zat thabin* companies to travel to these areas became increasingly difficult and many troupes disbanded. After 1988 with the suppression of democracy protests in the cities, *zat* troupes were prohibited from performing in urban areas under a law from British colonial times invoked by the military government selectively banning entertainment which attracts large audiences.

In 2011, Myanmar began to transition from a military regime to a more democratic society. Since 2012, the Myanmar government gradually loosened restrictions on which areas *zat thabin* troupes can perform in, and what they can program. This loosening has occasioned a revival of interest in talented *minthas* who have extensive training in classical Burmese dance, who can also incorporate new influences such as breakdance and hip-hop. The *hsaing waing* ensemble is complemented by another ensemble—a contemporary pop band sitting at the opposite side of the stage. This characteristic ability of *zat* performers to integrate the traditional with the contemporary in Burmese culture encourages younger

urban audiences to attend *zat pwe* and experience new pride in this hybridization of styles and continually transforming nature.

Today, two companies of Shwe Man Thabin tour Myanmar. Chan Thar directs one company with 70 performers. The second group is a smaller company, of mostly younger performers directed by Shwe Man Tin Maung's grandson, Tin Maung San Min Win. In 2013, the family celebrated 80 years of Shwe Man Thabin and its founder, Shwe Man Tin Maung in three all-night packed house *zat pwe* performances at the National Theater in Yangon, which also streamed live on the internet by Myanmar Radio and Television 4.

In addition to Shwe Man Thabin, the few *zat thabin* troupes remaining in Myanmar today—Po Chit, Win Naung and others—continue to travel to Buddhist temple festivals in villages and remote areas to perform three-night shows from September until April, before the monsoon rains. Dancers, clowns and musicians are trained at the University of Culture in Yangon and School of the Arts in Mandalay, but weak funding and dim prospects for employment in these fields discourages younger people from studying traditional Myanmar performing arts.

When Shwe Man Thabin travels to rural areas, eager and loyal audiences await them. Their audiences are comprised of families with small children, retired elders, off-duty soldiers, school-teachers, farmers, township administrators, local merchants, factory workers, young monks, and students, who all crowd into an open area laid with woven mats on the ground in front of a hastily, but solidly built stage. The phenomenal abilities of the Shwe Man Thabin troupe, descendants of Shwe Man Tin Maung, with their ever-changing dances, plays, songs, stage effects, over the course of a night excite and delight a mix of tastes and imaginations.

3. The Incredible Music of the *Hsaing Waing*

Sounding unlike any other ensemble in the world, the percussion-gong-oboe *hsaing waing* (*hsaing* in Burmese means “to hang” and *waing* means “circle”) excites audiences in Myanmar to a fever pitch and is an original sonic entity unto itself. Comparisons with Indonesian *Gamelan*, Western Jazz, and Indian drumming are frequently made, but all fall short of capturing the singular nature of Burmese music. Although an array of musical concepts, vocal phenomena and instrumental textures are cited as reasons for its uniqueness, its most significant distinction from other ensembles in Southeast Asia is the *hsaing waing*'s rhythmic language and predominance of drums that outweigh the sound of the gongs—particularly the pitched 21-drum set strung to stands of wood arranged in a circle known as the “*pat waing*.”

The intricacy of non-notated music sounds “separate but together”, veering on a seeming collision course but magically ending up at a surprising unison stop, which is followed by the burst of a cymbal crash setting off another accelerating, spilling-over volley of drum beats. This propels dancers; instigates sung dialogue in short bursts; underpins song verses; and creates a cascade of individual players' instrumental phrasing rippling off of unison main melodies. In both slow and frenetic musical tableaux, this great and virtuosic music tradition belongs to Myanmar's dominant ethnic group, the *Bama* or Burmans. It originated from the courts in Upper Myanmar, but has come to absorb musical legacies from surrounding cultures. The *hsaing waing* manifests itself in many ways in Burmese culture: with its principle role in *zat pwe*; as accompaniment to some Burmese films; its presence at Buddhist ceremonies and festivals; with frenzied rhythmic propulsion as a trance inducer in the spirit worship *Nat pwe*; and at official functions

and competitions. It is ready to be discovered by the world as a precious musical treasure and great artistic form.

Virtuoso *pat waing* player, Thiri Maung Maung, who is the *hsaing saya* (leader) for this Shwe Man Thabin performance, has won 19 gold-medals from the Myanmar Government's many National Performing Arts Competitions (*So-Ka-Ye-Ti*) since 1993. His *hsaing waing Thiri Maung Maung Shwe Ta Sait* (Gold Medal) includes the following instruments:

the drum circle *pat waing*

a tuned knobbed gong circle *kyay waing*

a set of gongs called *maung*

a double-reed oboe known as a *hne*

a large tuned double-headed drum *pat ma*

a set of six smaller tuned drums matched by another double headed drum—*kyauk lon bat* and *sekkhun*.

They are joined by an array of smaller percussion instruments: cymbals, woodblock, a bamboo clapper that marks timing, pulse, and emphasizes off-beat stress (*si, wa, lin gwin, wa let kote*)

The musicians of a *hsaing waing* used in the *zat pwe* (*zat hsaing*) develop special skills as an ensemble that involve an instrumental repartee with clowns and dancers, and freely-played segments of tunes adapted to ever-changing timing from the stage. The *hsaing saya*'s phrasing is followed closely by the *hne saya*, both of whom take cues from dancers and clowns, sometimes interrupting a song to segue into a dance or speech from the stage, while the *hsaing saya* improvises solos to accommodate lengthy costume changes, dancers who are out of breath or a *mintha*-director's sudden change in the order of the program. Flexibility in adapting to the unforeseen is a prerequisite for all the musicians. In modern times, *hsaing waing* players alternate with a pop band for a portion of a *zat pwe*'s program. Frequently, the bi-musical keyboard player in the pop band will play along with the *hsaing waing*, using a Burmese piano fingering style developed since the 1870's on the piano (*sandaya*).

What is the repertoire of the *hsaing waing*? Classical song forms with rhythmic patterns, modes and a soundscape of particular paired intervals (learned orally over centuries) define a foundation on which new melodies are composed. The flexible nature of *zat hsaing* intersperses traditional song genres with newly created music according to the needs of the stage. One of the oldest genres, *thakyinkan*, is used during offerings to the Buddha. Some of these very specific song forms were later matched with particular dances and song structures derived from the Thai *Ramayana* and Inao dramas (*Yodaya*). A popular genre for a *zat pwe* from the early 20th century, the "weeping song" or "*ngo kyin*," was an occasion for a *mintha* to dramatize sorrow in an extensive stage vocabulary of sobs, gasps, sighs and pauses, through song. New lyrics and newly styled melodies with less exaggerated expression generated continued interest in an aesthetic of lament as the popularity of these older weeping songs faded out. (vi) Stately instrumental preludes such as the *Ye Kin* (Boat Watchmen's song), used to announce monk novitiate ceremonies are sometimes followed by a folk song form, "*Byaw*" with a characteristic drum pulse for which Shwe Man Tin Maung choreographed a *mintha* group dance. Great *hsaing sayas*, such as Sein Beda, Sein Hla Maung, and Sein Ba Maung Kalei would compose melodies for instrumental medleys central to a *zat*

pwe's core repertoire. Thiri Maung Maung and his generation continue to compose tunes which perpetually enliven the core repertoire in *zat thabin*. (vii)(viii)

4. Momentum and Sudden Pause in Traditional Myanmar Music, Dance and Image



Exhibit #54: Carved Teak Image of Rama in Konbaung costume beneath a mask of *Dathagiri* (Demon) flanked by two mythical Kinnari figures (“*Buddhist Art in Myanmar*” Asia Society Exhibition Catalogue, Yale University Press, 2015)

If, when reflecting on sculpted or illustrated dancing figures in Burmese iconography, a viewer could imagine hearing rhythms that might have propelled the arrested moment in a particular image, a connection to Burmese music and gesture will be set, ironically, “in motion.”

First-time listeners to traditional instrumental music ensembles in Myanmar are exhilarated by the multi-textured nature of the *hsaing waing* drums and gongs, cymbals played with a non-synchronicity that is perplexing. Observers unfamiliar with Myanmar traditional music will notice immediately the many drums rippling off of each other, sometimes not ending as a compact unit on a beat. Seemingly

unpredictable phrasing units produce passages that start suddenly, stop suddenly, break for a pause and cause confusion in the new listener’s ear. In

a similar manner, dance motions through time appear fluid but also have many stopping points, gaps, and accelerating motion with pauses—a fluidity which derives from the a corresponding legacy of the movement of jointed, Burmese puppets manipulated by 64 strings.



If the viewer/listener thinks less about the exact position of the dance, and more about the moment “coming into” or “leaving from” the gesture, the closer she/he gets to understanding the exquisite movements. This journey of music and dance, which is both synchronous and staggered, delineates the art of the pause (*ngan, ha*) or sudden stops, which produces a state of euphoria and delight that the Burmese call “*pi ti*.”

Thai composer Nop Sotthibhandu, when comparing Thai, Mon and Burmese cultural aesthetics noted that for Thai classical drama, art, music and dance, the Thai preference for smoothness, a palate of slower tempos and texture as tableau stood in marked contrast to the fast gestures, hurtling instrumental tempos and depth of carved images in both Myanmar royal court and folk cultures.



Alinga Kyaw Swa Shwe Man Tin Maung dancing in “Hna Pa Thwa” ca 1966. Mintha Shwe Man Tin Maung: Hnit Ba Thwa Dance Pose

References:

- i Ma Theingi, “The Illusion of Life: Burmese Marionettes, White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1995
- ii U Gon Ban, “Myanma Zat Thabin,” U Khin Nyunt, Yangon, 1966
- iii Tang Yi Sein, “The Pyu Diplomatic Mission of A.D. 802 dispatched to China”, Journal of Research in Myanmar History Vol.1, 1977, Vol.2, 1978 and Vol.3, 1979
- iv Daw Khin Chit Win, personal conversation, 2013

v Ludu Daw Amah, “Shwe Man Tin Maung,” Ludu Press, Mandalay, 1970

vi U Chit Oo Nyo, “Lawka Zat Hkon, Zat Hkon Lawka, (The World a Stage, The Stage a World), Yadana Bon Sa Oht Taik, Yangon, 1996.

vii U Gon Ban, “Myanma Zat Thabin” (Burmese Zat Theater), U Khin Nyunt, Yangon, 1966

viii U Zaw Hein, Shwe Daun Nyo Tho Ma Hote Sanit Ta Ku Ei A Sa (Shwe Daun Nyo Or... The Start of One Dance Technique)”, Ministry of Culture, Moe Min Sapay, Yangon, 1999

About Performing Arts at Asia Society

Asia Society’s Performing Arts Program is an intrinsic component of Asia Society’s commitment to sharing vital aspects of Asian culture by placing creative expression at the center of a more comprehensive understanding of culture. Whether it is experimental artists exploring new territory or traditional artists bringing to life the voices of a great legacy, the Performing Arts Program has created a powerful platform for connecting and engaging with Asian culture within a deeper cultural context. We have presented extraordinary artists from renowned names such as Lang Lang, Tan Dun, Abida Parveen, Shen Wei, David Henry Hwang, Sardono and Malavika Sarukkai, to the latest emerging voices. Beginning in 1957, with New York’s first performance by Indian maestro Ravi Shankar, the Performing Arts Program has since presented over a thousand performances, including original commissioned work from Asian and Asian-American artists, as well as American artists influenced by Asia, such as Phillip Glass and Vijay Iyer. From Indonesian hip-hop to electronica from Shanghai; experimental dance to the deeply moving traditions of India’s *Kuttiyatam*, Burmese *Zat Pwe* or Chinese *Kunqu* opera, we foster artistic exchange and provide creative opportunities for artists. For more information, please visit asiasociety.org

Credits:

This presentation of *Music and Dance from Myanmar: Shwe Man Thabin* was organized by the Asia Society Performing Arts Program. Support for this program was provided, in part, by the Asian Cultural Council, Yoma Strategic Holdings and the New York State Council on the Arts. Major support for Performing Arts at the Asia Society is provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Helen and Will Little, the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Inc and the New York State Council on the Arts.

This program is part of *Myanmar’s Moment*, a groundbreaking series of programs built around Asia Society Museum exhibition *Buddhist Art of Myanmar*, which runs from February 10 to May 10, 2015, in New York City. The exhibition is the first major presentation in the West devoted solely to the art of Myanmar and includes a treasure trove of sculptures of the Buddha, many of which are leaving Myanmar for the first time.

Kit Young, Consultant, US Tour, Shwe Man Thabin

Sai Nyi Nyi, US Tour company manager/liaison, Linkit Myanmar

Asia Society Staff:

Rachel Cooper, Director, Global Performing Arts and Cultural Initiatives

Rachel Rosado, Senior Program Officer, Cultural Programs

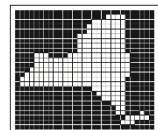
Hesh Sarmalkar, Director, Events and Visitor Services

Elaine Merguerian, Director, Communications

Eric DeArmon, A/V Manager

Jeff Tompkins, New York Content Manager, Asia Society online

State of the Arts



NYSCA