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Myanmar Magic: Tell a Joke, and You Disappear

By CHOE SANG-HUN

MANDALAY, [Myanmar](#) — U Par Par Lay goes to India to have his toothache treated. The Indian dentist wonders why the Burmese man has come all the way to India.

“Don’t you have dentists in Myanmar?” he asks.

“Oh, yes, we do, doctor,” Mr. Par Par Lay says. “But in Myanmar, we are not allowed to open our mouths.”

That’s a favorite joke by Mr. Par Par Lay, a third-generation practitioner of a-nyeint pwe, Myanmar’s traditional vaudeville, featuring puppets, music and slapstick comedy tinged with in-your-face political satire — all in a country where cracking the wrong joke can land you in jail.

Mr. Par Par Lay, the 60-year-old leader of the Mustache Brothers troupe, is paying dearly for it.

About midnight on Sept. 25, his relatives say, the police raided their home-cum-theater here and took him away. On the same day, at least one other popular comedian who had previously been imprisoned for his political jokes, a man named Zargana in Yangon, the largest city, was arrested, according to [Amnesty International](#) and local residents.

The tightening of the gag on dissident voices occurred as the ruling junta conducted a bloody crackdown on the first major pro-democracy uprising in this country in 19 years, led by Buddhist monks.

“I tried to find him, but I don’t know where he is,” said Mr. Par Par Lay’s wife, Daw Ma Win Ma, 56, a dancer. “If the past is an indication, he must have been beaten a lot. I am worried about whether he is alive or not.”

The Mustache Brothers are a family troupe of 13 comedians, dancers and musicians. Mr. Par Par Lay and his brother U Lu Maw, 58, favor handlebar mustaches, the source of their group’s name. They used to travel from village to village, performing at weddings, funerals and festivals. In former days, Burmese kings would watch a-nyeint pwe (pronounced ah-NYAY pway) to gauge public sentiment couched in the comedy.

But it seems the current junta never developed a taste for it.

In 1990, when the military government rejected the decisive victory of the National League for Democracy led by [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#) in the country’s first election in 30 years and placed her under house arrest, Mr. Par Par Lay was thrown in jail for six months for his political jokes.

In 1996 his troupe performed before an audience of 2,000, including Yangon-based foreign ambassadors, at the lakeside compound of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi, by then a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. A videotape of the

event shows Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi laughing, clearly entertained.

The generals apparently were less amused. Mr. Par Par Lay and his cousin U Lu Zaw, also a comedian, were sentenced to seven years in a labor camp. Mr. Par Par Lay was released after five and a half years.

Afterward, the government scratched the Mustache Brothers from the list of state-licensed artists that residents of Myanmar, the former Burma, were permitted to hire. Determined to keep their tradition alive and to make a living, they turned to performing for foreigners.

Even with Mr. Par Par Lay gone, his family has kept the theater on a run-down street, which Mr. Lu Maw proudly likened to the West End of London and Broadway.

“We are artists: we believe in ordinary people, not in the government,” Mr. Lu Maw said in English. “We need light, but in Myanmar, light on and off. Not enough electricity. No water supply. School — money, money, money! Ordinary people no money.

“So we joke. People need a good joke. But the government don’t like us because we joke.”

Mr. Lu Maw, the only English speaker in the troupe, whose spoofs the government has appeared not to mind too much as long as they are performed only in English, said he learned the language from tourists.

“My favorite English is American and English slang,” he said. “My brother in the clink, up the river, in big house.”

His street-side theater can accommodate barely 10 red plastic chairs. Marionettes are hung against a wall. On display was a picture of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi visiting the Mustache Brothers in June 2002. Outside, Mr. Lu Maw’s nephews kept an eye out for the police.

Mr. Lu Maw said Mr. Par Par Lay had strong opinions about the generals who have mismanaged this resource-rich country into poverty.

As one story unfolds, a general has died and become a big fish. As the tsunami rolls toward Myanmar, the fish surfaces and admonishes the wave: “Stop! I have already done that here.”

But Mr. Lu Maw said the recent crackdown on the monks by soldiers was “no good for jokes.”

“People are sad,” he said. “Man kill man, you go to hell. This Buddhist belief. Now they are killing monks! They go beyond hell.”

Mr. Lu Maw said everyone in Myanmar was busy trying to keep up with rising prices, which is what originally drove people onto the streets to protest in August. International pressure has helped his family, he said. When Mr. Par Par Lay was arrested in 1996, he said, British and Hollywood comedians and actors wrote to the Myanmar government in protest.

“We need their help again,” Mr. Lu Maw said. “[Richard Gere](#)’s support is especially important because he is a Buddhist. We need a Rambo.”

Despite Mr. Lu Maw's tireless optimism, his theater was permeated with sadness. In recent weeks the family has struggled to make ends meet because of the dearth of foreign tourists. Mustache Brothers T-shirts are collecting dust. Older members of the family were lying listlessly on a wooden bed on the mud-brick floor.

"If the government comes and takes his clothes and food, then I will know he is alive," Ms. Ma Win Ma, Mr. Par Par Lay's wife, said. Mr. Lu Maw said that when Mr. Par Par Lay was in prison camp, he used to perform for other inmates before bedtime. "Maybe he is performing in prison somewhere," Mr. Lu Maw said. "Yes, we are afraid. But we keep on going. We just joke. This is our job, our family tradition."

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