

The Rocket - Director's statement – by Kim Mordaunt

Making our film *Bomb Harvest* in Laos was life-changing for producer Sylvia Wilczynski and me: having such intimate and extended access into children's lives in a country brutalised by war and in the midst of huge change. The socialist country was opening up to the outside world and international companies clambering to exploit its rich resources.

Bomb Harvest's central character was an Australian bomb disposal specialist and featured the Lao children who collect bombs to sell as scrap metal. The Lao and international response to the film was that we should make another film with a Lao child as the protagonist. And because Laos didn't have a funded film industry we should be the team to endeavour to make Laos' first internationally released feature film. Having met Lao Australian Pauline Phayvanh Phoumindr when she was working as a translator on *Bomb Harvest*, the three of us knew we wanted to all make another film together in Laos. And so began a long period of research, writing and casting, to develop *The Rocket*.

The Rocket is a rite of passage story of a boy's journey through grief, guilt and self-doubt - set against the timely universal themes of the displacement of people by industry and the legacy of war. Millions of traditional people across the globe are being relocated because of big business. Over 60 million people worldwide have been displaced by dams alone. Australia's opportunistic economic relationship with Asia makes us a big part of this issue, which is a central catalyst to Ahlo's journey in *The Rocket*.

All the characters in *The Rocket* are based on real people we have met while living and working in Laos. Even the character Purple was inspired by an eccentric alcoholic wearing a purple suit, who we met in a very remote village in Laos when making *Bomb Harvest*.

Purple was hugely enticing as a person but also a powerful metaphor for Lao's history. He was full of contradictions: a deep Lao heritage but also a clone of western US influence from the Secret War when the Lao Hmong tribes people were recruited by the CIA to fight for them.

With the majority of Lao being Buddhist or Animist, where the natural world hums with spirits that can be good or bad, it seemed right to centre our personal story inside this reality and to give the narrative a fable-like quality – which is true to Lao folklore. It also strangely opened the story into a simple more popular form, which was an effective way to draw a wider audience into this story.

During rapid change by external forces such as industrialisation, traditional people can cling to their beliefs as they feel their sense of self being taken away. And for Ahlo's grandmother Taitok, the traditionalist, Ahlo (the Twin) becomes someone to blame when her world is torn to pieces.

Grief can bring the most terrible confrontations but it can also bring people together in great tenderness. When Ahlo meets the mischievous orphan Kia and her uncle Purple, he begins to find hope again after his loss. Laos, despite its tragic war history, has a remarkable ability to keep moving forward, finding spirit and humour in great adversity; most Lao people believe that all aspects of life must be filled with *Muan* (fun) or it is not worth living. *The Rocket* is filled with this spirit and humour.

The Rocket Festival, which provokes the sky gods for rain at the end of dry season each year, is a simultaneously tense and riotous ancient fertility festival. It is now, more than ever, powerfully symbolic as water is increasingly controlled by multinational corporations. It's a hotpot event where people come together and vent their communal need for affirmation – and for Ahlo to survive he must find this (in a community, in his family and in himself).

To get some of the genuine fervour of the festival we filmed at a real rocket festival in Laos. I then scripted and story-boarded around some of the best moments that we encountered. We then recreated the Rocket Festival in the same location, and melded the scripted scenes and documentary footage. This gives the fable-like quality of the film a strong subtext and edge as we see the real people of the most bombed country on the planet shoot back at the sky.

Having shot a lot of verite myself, my main aim with DOP Andy Commis was to shoot on the shoulder so there was a synergy between lens and our characters – especially with children and newer actors where having to hit too many marks can become confusing and false. I liked to keep takes as loose and long as possible to let the children search for things in each other and to allow for a certain amount of “play” where responses start to become spontaneous and real. This meant quite a lot of re-scripting on the run where I tried to serve the actors' voices and their own histories, as well as the story at hand.

For Sitthiphon, who plays Ahlo, and myself, we tried to share things that made us most happy and also our big losses in our lives, which are echoed in the story of *The Rocket*. Ki bravely reveals some of these powerful onscreen truths. As a street kid, Ki's deepest hurt is abandonment and at the moment when he is rejected by his father, his grandmother and community at the rocket festival, we feel Sitthiphon as much as we feel Ahlo. In the character of Ahlo, we also see Sitthiphon's incredible resilience and attitude to never give up.

Kim Mordaunt
Director