

# Thailand's Beautiful Boxer

No crying in this game

By JOEL DOSSI

In Thailand, it's called "The Science of Eight Limbs," because practitioners of Muay Thai, or Thai kickboxing, use the entire body to subdue their opponent. The hands, feet, elbows and knees work in harmony to punch and kick the adversary until he succumbs.

It's a manly sport, requiring total athletic prowess and the extreme endurance of pain. It is a sport, says the Professional Muay Thai Association, unfit for women.

The Thai world was turned upside down six years ago when Parinya Charoenphol, a pre-operative male-to-female transgendered person, joined the professional ranks of that masculine and lethal sport. She was admired by many in Thailand for her courage, and despised by others for tarnishing the sport's masculine image.

Parinya, affectionately nicknamed Nong Toom in Thailand, is the subject of Thai biopic *Beautiful Boxer*. Now in limited release in the United States, the film won the 2004 Grand Prix Award by a unanimous vote of the jury at the Brussels International Film Festival.

"I was hesitant to make a film about Nong Toom's life," says the film's director Ekachai Uekrongtham in an e-mail interview from Bangkok. "I'd heard of her and was intrigued by her story. To me, she's a walking paradox: a lethal kickboxer who fights like a man but dreams of becoming a woman. The conflicts within such a

young person must have been extraordinary. So ultimately, the most important conflict in the film is probably the internal conflict within Nong Toom herself."

Ekachai's artistic interests have always centered on conflicts within human situations. As founding artistic director of ACTION Theatre, one of Singapore's best-known modern professional theater companies, he has staged works dealing with the brothers Chang and Eng, the original "Siamese Twins" who became freak-show stars in America; Asian mail-order brides; and gay relationships between Thais and Westerners.

"I was drawn towards Nong Toom's story at first because I wanted to explore the concepts of masculinity versus femininity," says Ekachai. "The emotional struggle within herself has the greatest resonance for me. As I was writing the screenplay, other layers presented themselves."

Ekachai first met Nong Toom shortly after her sex-change operation in 1999. "Admittedly, I went to that meeting with some pre-conceived ideas about who she is, the boy she was, and the man she used to be," the director says. "She surprised me."

Nong Toom is now a successful model, actress and Muay Thai teacher based in Bangkok. *Beautiful Boxer* follows Nong Toom from his childhood years, "trying to match his heart with his body," and

continues through the height of his career, when he began taking hormones.

"It's about masculinity vs. femininity," Ekachai says. "It's also about heart vs. head, dream vs. reality, and fighting vs. living."

Surprisingly, the Buddhist majority of Thailand is quite accepting of transsexuals, or katoey, believing their condition is the result of bad karma. "The Buddhist philosophy has helped Nong Toom and, I believe, many transgendered people find inner peace," says Ekachai. "It helps ground them and calm their hearts. When they accept their fate, it's easier for them to move forward and find their inner strength."

But Thai media – and the government's censorship board – prefers katoey to be portrayed as buffoons. "I was a little worried but the film was passed uncut. I think we do have enlightened people on the board," says Ekachai with an :-> emoticon.

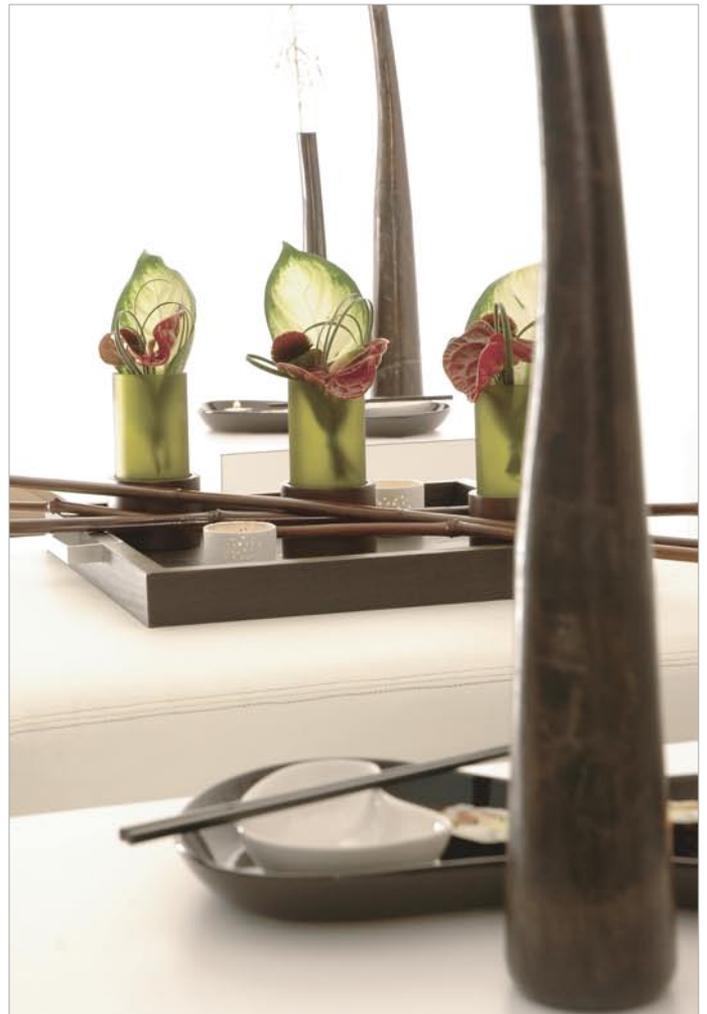
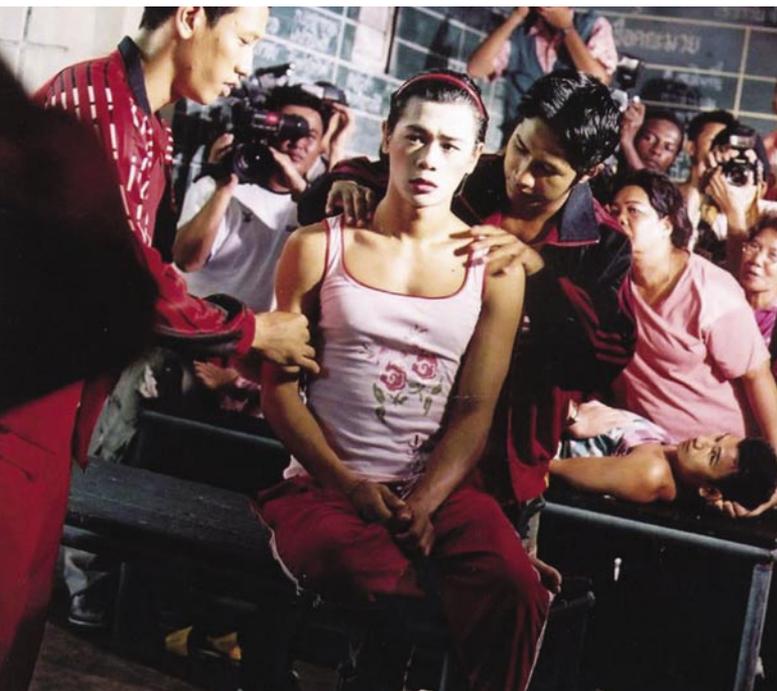
The director does concede that the Thai version is considerably shorter than the international version. "Emotional and visually driven scenes were left out. There was this belief that Thai people only wanted to see comedy and action," he says. "I didn't agree then and I still don't agree now."

Ekachai points out that prejudice exists against transsexuals, especially with the proliferation of Thai farces that feature transgendered characters in cartoon-cutout roles. The international popularity of films like *Iron Ladies* and *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* support his case.

"*Beautiful Boxer* is a story of a human being," he says. "People place too much importance on things like sexual orientation, and too much prejudice has come out from doing so. Nong Toom and the Siamese Twins may be perceived as freaks by some, but to me they're extraordinary. And in the extraordinary, we often find something very meaningful for the ordinary."

*Beautiful Boxer*, winner of the HBO sponsored Audience Choice Award for Favorite Narrative Feature at the 2004 Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, is scheduled to open at Seattle's Landmark Varsity Theatre on Feb. 11. For more on the film, visit [beautifulboxer-themovie.com](http://beautifulboxer-themovie.com). 99

LOVELY AND AMAZING: *Beautiful Boxer's* Asanee Suwan, who won the 2004 Thai "Oscar" for playing the transgendered kickboxer in the film.



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