

## **Goldsmiths and Myanmar - first collaborations**

**Article by Richard Shannon**



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In May 2013, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made a specific appeal to London University to assist in the rebuilding of Myanmar's university system:

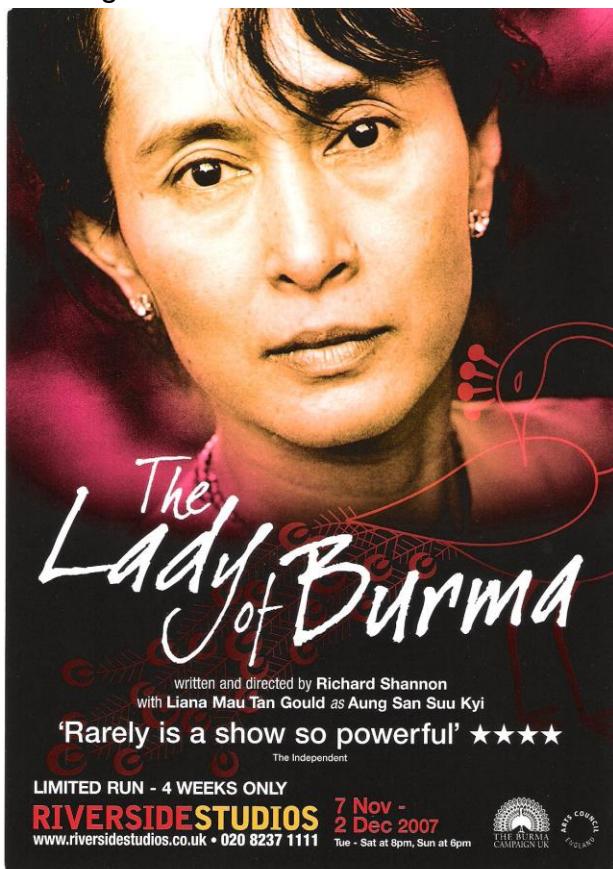
'Now the standard of our university education has fallen so low that graduates have nothing except a photograph of their graduation ceremony to show for the years they spent at university.....We want to change the situation to give our people pride in themselves and to do that we need to strengthen our education system. We need to produce vigorous young people who are capable of meeting the challenges that our country will have to face in the future.'<sup>1</sup>

Richard Shannon, a lecturer with Media and Communications and Theatre and Performance, supported by Dr Gerald Lidstone, director of ICCE, responded to this call by setting up an informal grouping of academics to explore how Goldsmiths could engage with this process (the Myanmar Group).

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<sup>1</sup> Video address to a British Council conference at Senate House (9/5/13)

In addition to Dr Lidstone, the initial group comprised Gerry McCulloch (Head of Cinematography/Media and Communications), Judy Holland (Convenor of MA script writing/Media and Communications) and Professor Robert Gordon (Theatre and Performance) and associate members, Mr Anthony Russell of the Chandos Foundation and Mr John Martin, director of Pan Intercultural Arts. The group has been joined by Professor Michael Hitchcock and Dr Barley Norton. Dr Lidstone has considerable experience of developing projects in Vietnam with backing from the Ford Foundation and Richard Shannon has been engaged with Myanmar since 2005. In that year he undertook a research trip to Myanmar funded by the Arts Council in order to write a play about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, then under house arrest. This play premiered at the Old Vic as a fund raiser for the Burma Campaign UK. This text proved to be an effective part of the campaign to raise Myanmar in public debate, running at the Riverside Studios in London and touring nationally.





<sup>i</sup>Liana Mau Tan Gould as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at the Riverside Studios 2007



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Liana Mau Tan Gould and Richard Shannon meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the Speaker's House, following her address to parliament (21/06/12)

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Richard Shannon continued to engage with Myanmar and worked with the Free Word Centre in London and the leading Myanmar artist, Htein Lin, to organise the first Burmese Arts Festival in London in October 2010.



In January 2014, the Myanmar Group organised a half day conference to discuss how Goldsmiths could engage with the reconstruction of Higher Education in Myanmar. This event was hosted by the Warden and addressed by the director of the British Council in Myanmar, Mr Kevin McKenzie. The conference identified the key challenges, including how any intervention might be funded and who might be the best partners for Goldsmiths.



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The task now was to make contact with relevant institutions, both in Higher Education and non-statutory arts organisations. In May 2014, Gerry McCulloch visited Myanmar to make these contacts. The blog of his trip can be found here: <http://www.darshanaphotoart.co.uk/blog/2014/5/yangon>

Before he set out, Richard Shannon introduced Gerry McCulloch to Htein Lin and his wife, Vicky Bowman. Htein Lin was a political prisoner and is a leading Myanmar artist and Vicky Bowman was the UK ambassador to Myanmar. They provided invaluable access to a wide range of institutions, including the National University of the Arts and Culture, Yangon and the New Zero Arts Space.

Gerry McCulloch was given a warm but cautious welcome. Many institutions were not entirely confident that western universities were prepared to engage for the long term, particularly when it was realised that any investment was not likely to produce a return in terms of recruitment for some considerable time.

From the outset, Goldsmiths engagement was built on a commitment to the long term and a recognition that assisting a society in transition from brutal military dictatorship to democracy was, in itself, the right thing to do.

The group's task was now to draw up specific proposals for collaboration and to seek funding. However, an additional task would be navigating the complexities of securing permission from the Myanmar government, under the former general, U Thein Sein. To this end, we invited the Myanmar ambassador to the UK, H.E. U Kyaw Zwar Min to meet the Warden at Goldsmiths on November 5th 2014. The ambassador is a keen amateur artist and the visit included a tour of the Art department, hosted by Professor Michael Archer. The ambassador seemed impressed and keen to assist any request we might make to the Myanmar Ministry of Education.

This visit was followed a month later by a seminar at the Royal Society of Arts focused on engaging business with our plans. The event was funded by ICCE and attended by a range of company executives active in Myanmar, including Mr Philip Hawkins, London Office Director – Jardine Matheson and Co. Ltd and Ms Fiona Ng, First Vice President – United Overseas Bank Ltd. This initial meeting was not designed to raise money, but rather to see how Goldsmiths' plans might converge with corporate social responsibility and sponsorship policies. The contacts made at this meeting were useful and the business delegates made it clear that they would be interested to continue the dialogue once Goldsmiths had established working relationships on the ground in Myanmar.

Over the course of 2015, the Myanmar group continued to meet and refine what exactly we might be able to offer to universities and other arts groups in Myanmar.

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In particular, Judy Holland's collaborative model, Training the Trainers, was adopted as part of any offer and a list drawn up of specific potential partner institutions that might provide a good fit with Goldsmiths' profile. These included: The National University of Arts and Culture in Yangon and Mandalay, the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation and Arts for All (formerly, Human Drama). This last organisation was set up by the British Council and is designed to take social action dramas to rural villages. Arts for All's mentor is the UK theatre director, John Martin. John attended the first Myanmar conference at Goldsmiths and the RSA business seminar and is now acting as a link to Arts for All.

Richard Shannon also attended the All Party Parliamentary Group (Burma), chaired by Baroness Kinnock.



All Party Parliamentary Group Burma 2015

In these meetings he made a number of additional contacts, including Daw May Tha Hla, director of the charity, Helping the Burmese Delta and Dr. Michael Marett-Crosby. Dr Marett-Crosby is director of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's charities and offered invaluable advice. He has been in discussion with Dr Lidstone and Professor Michael Hitchcock regarding the possibility of commissioning a wide ranging report

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on sustainable cultural tourism. Daw May Tha Hla introduced Richard Shannon to Ko Khin Maung Htay, a graduate of NUAC, now studying in London. Ko Htay was part of the first cohort to graduate from NUAC in 1993 and his peers are now all in senior positions at NUAC. Through him, Richard Shannon was able to make direct contact with the Rector and Heads of Departments in both the Yangon and Mandalay campuses. This was to prove invaluable as it provided evidence of solid contacts in country and would form the basis of a funding bid to the Goldsmiths' International Engagement Fund in 2016.

Richard Shannon prepared the bid, following meetings with Mr Geraint Fox, Associate Director, Internationalisation, and in April 2016, the award was made. This was a crucial step as it would allow relationships to be built on the ground and much more detailed knowledge gained as to the nature of both the opportunities and the challenges. Gerry McCulloch, joined Richard Shannon, extending his trip to the Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore, to include Myanmar.

The trip was extremely fruitful and following account outlines what was achieved:

**1) National University of Arts and Culture (NUAC) - Yangon and Mandalay campuses.**

The first visit took place at NUAC (Yangon). The Rector, U Aung Naing Myint and his senior staff made a formal presentation of the work of the university:  
<https://www.dropbox.com/home?preview=NUAC+VIDEO.mp4>



The Rector, U Aung Naing Myint and Richard Shannon

Richard Shannon and Gerry McCulloch offered taster workshops in playwriting and lighting, but initially, these were politely declined. In the end, Richard Shannon was asked to give an impromptu playwriting class to over 100 students! The session took improvisation as a starting point and it was clear this was a very new approach, but it worked well and the students were as lively and engaged as any you might find at Goldsmiths. The staff were intrigued and very keen to share practice and build on this first contact.



Students perform their plays as part of the workshop delivered by Richard Shannon NUAC 2016



Richard Shannon addresses the staff and students at NUAC (Mandalay)



Gerry McCulloch in discussion with the Head of Film (NUAC Mandalay)

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The meeting in Mandalay with the Rector, Daw Khin Kyi Pyar and her staff was equally productive.



The Rector, Daw Khin Kyi Pyar presents Richard Shannon with a student's work.

The Rectors requested help with curriculum development, selection processes and assessment criteria in Art, Music, Film and Theatre. They would like to see summary documents covering these areas. The Rectors are also hoping to set up MAs for the first time and would like to discuss how we structure post-graduate work.



Gerry McCulloch and Richard Shannon welcomed in Mandalay

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The students come to the university with no preparation for the subjects they are taught. This means that the first year is very basic and also includes a range of foundational subjects such as science and maths. The teaching method seems largely by rote and a lot of work will have to be done to encourage critical thinking. We need to bear this in mind and keep all our documents clear and concise.

The Rectors requested help with teaching techniques. They feel they only have 'local knowledge' and are in need of 'international and modern' knowledge.



A student sculpture commenting on the political reality in Myanmar

There is no research culture at present, although the Yangon campus has one academic with a PhD in musicology from Tokyo University - Dr. Su Zar Zar. She speaks excellent English and is very keen to collaborate. Dr Zar Zar is an expert in Burmese harp playing and is now in contact with Dr Barley Norton of the Music Department, who has a special interest in this instrument. The hope is that they might develop a joint research project.



Dr Su Zar Zar in discussion with Richard Shannon

## **2) Arts for All (formerly Human Drama)**

John Martin of Pan Intercultural Arts laid the ground work for Richard Shannon's meeting with Arts for All and the British Council set up a three day workshop. In a meeting with their Education Programme Manager Myat Lay Tint and Kyi Kyi Pyone, the Arts Programme manager, it was made clear that the British Council hoped that Goldsmiths' commitment to working in Myanmar was long term. Richard Shannon and Gerry McCulloch underlined that the college understood the need for a serious engagement over time and that regular visits to run programmes of work was essential.

Arts for All is a company of 12 performers, drawn from the local community and in many cases, with very damaged backgrounds. These young people (average age 20) are both intelligent and skilled in forum theatre. They need to develop vocal and movement skills and are keen to secure a building to operate as a youth centre and performance base.

A three day theatre skills and business development workshop was delivered by Richard Shannon, working closely with the theatre troupe manager, Daw Aye Thinzar Ye Win and the project manager, Thetei Chaw.

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The workshop was very successful and Richard Shannon hopes to build on this in 2017.



The young actors of Arts for All improvising a drama about homophobia in Myanmar

This project is a good example of theatre for development and Richard Shannon will work with Professor Osita Okagbue and the Applied theatre team in TAP, to draft an AHRC bid. The actual structure of the bid is to be determined, but the hope is that Goldsmiths practitioner-academics can spend time with Arts for All and document and analyse their work in preparation for a publication on social action/forum drama in Myanmar. The study would be set within the context of a society in transition and make assessment of the impact of the arts on that transition to democracy.



The young actors of Arts for All improvising a story about ethnic conflict

## 8) Pyoe Pin - a UK Department for International Development project

A meeting was held with the director of Pyoe Pin, Mr Gerry Fox.

Mr Fox supports the work of Arts for All and produces a TV drama focussing on a Human Rights lawyer. This drama is used by Arts for All as a starting point for raising key issues regarding access to justice, domestic abuse and gender inequality in their performances in rural villages.

Pyoe Pin are keen to collaborate with Goldsmiths and their support could prove useful in framing the AHRC bid to be drafted by Theatre and Performance. In addition, Mr Fox is interested in discussing how Arts for All might secure a building to develop their work.

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### **3) BBC Media Action - The Teacup Diaries ( A Burmese weekly drama)**

A meeting was held with the director of BBC Media Action, Mr Ed Paultker and the editor, Ms Fiona Ledger. An extensive interview will form the basis for a an academic paper on the Burmese radio drama, *The Teacup Diaries*. This series aims to address issues of discrimination and social cohesion. This paper will be offered for publication to the International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media.



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The following meetings were additional and could lead to further promotion of the Goldsmiths' brand in Myanmar.

#### **4) Myanmar Motion Picture organisation**

A meeting was held with the director of the Myanmar Motion Picture organisation, Daw Grace Swe Zin Htaik and her staff.

This organisation have been tasked with setting up a new film school and have government backing. MMPO made it clear that they would really welcome Goldsmiths' consultancy on the building, staffing and equipping of the new school.



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## 5) The National Museum Yangon

A meeting was held with the director of the National Museum, Daw Nang Lao Ngin and her deputies. The museum has the most wonderful collections, including the royal regalia of the last king of Burma and his golden throne.

The museum is in real need of assistance with cataloguing and digitising of the collection, staff training and marketing. She would welcome any advice from ICCE and I have put them in touch with Dr Lidstone and Professor Hitchcock.



King Thibaw's Lion throne at the National Museum in Yangon

A major film on the last king and his family will premiere next year. *Burma's Lost Royals* could be an ideal way to publicise the royal collection. Gerry McCulloch, Convenor of the MA in film, is the cinematographer on this film, directed and produced by Alex Bescoby.



Gerry McCulloch filming in Yangon



Alex Bescoby interviewing King Thibaw's great granddaughter.

## 6) Student Recruitment Agencies

Meetings were held with three agencies: Crown Education, Regent and the International Scholastic Group.

It was acknowledged that the subjects offered by Goldsmiths in the arts, could be difficult to sell to students seeking employment in the law, accountancy and engineering etc. However, they are happy to begin to publicise the Goldsmiths' offer and were particularly interested in Media and ICCE. The International Scholastic Group were the most keen to form a relationship with Goldsmiths and recognised that the college has an international brand.

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## **9) Informal contacts**

Many useful contacts were made during the course of the trip and these will be followed up, including: The Goethe Institute, Frontier magazine, The Asia Foundation, the British Chamber of commerce, the Wadan film Festival and the New Zero Art Space.



Aye Ko / New Zero Arts Space

## **Next steps**

The Myanmar group has joined the Asia Centre and is preparing a slate of costed projects to take to corporations active in Myanmar. Funding will also be sought from research bodies, the British Council and Dfid.

The proposals include:

Projects for NUAC (Yangon and Mandalay)

- 1) Consultancy on curriculum development at a local level/student selection, assessment and teaching techniques.
- 2) A workshop in Fine Art delivered by Mr Peter Fillingham (Associate Lecturer - Art Department).
- 3) A workshop in Western music delivered by Dr. Barley Norton (Music Department)
- 4) A workshop in Playwriting delivered by Mr Richard Shannon (Theatre and Performance)

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- 5) A workshop in cinematography delivered by Mr Gerry McCulloch (Media and Communications)
  - 6) A consultancy for the National Museum in Yangon to be delivered by Dr Gerald Lidstone and Professor Michael Hitchcock, (ICCE).
  - 7) A programme of workshops for Arts For All delivered by the Applied Theatre Team in theatre skills and arts management.
  - 8) A consultancy for the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation on the establishment of a new film school to be delivered by Gerry McCulloch and colleagues, (Media and Communications).
  - 9) Two fee waivers in support of Fellowships have been offered by ICCE. These Fellowships would be suitable for post-graduates with good English and funding for living expenses and flights will be sought.

Over the coming months these proposals will be taken to potential funders and the relationship with Myanmar consolidated. The process has begun and a recent visit by NUAC's Head of Music to Goldsmiths has confirmed the strong desire to collaborate, share practice and build a sustainable relationship.

The Myanmar group welcomes all offers of assistance and anyone interested in contributing to this initiative should get in touch with Richard Shannon: [r.shannon@gold.ac.uk](mailto:r.shannon@gold.ac.uk)



