

# រន្ទះឈាមស្វាយ

**MANTA RAY**

A FILM BY PHUTTIPHONG AROONPHENG

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A person is standing in shallow water, viewed from behind. The water is a deep teal color, and the person's skin is dark. The person is wearing dark shorts. The water is rippling around their legs. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**DIVERSION AND LES FILMS DE L'ÉTRANGER  
PRESENT**

2018, Thailand / France / China

105 minutes, Color, 1.85, 5.1

Original Language: Thai

## SYNOPSIS

Near a coastal village of Thailand, by the sea where thousands of Rohingya refugees have drowned, a local fisherman finds an injured man lying unconscious in the forest. He rescues the stranger, who does not speak a word, offers him his friendship and names him Thongchai. But when the fisherman suddenly disappears at sea, Thongchai slowly begins to take over his friend's life – his house, his job and his ex-wife...

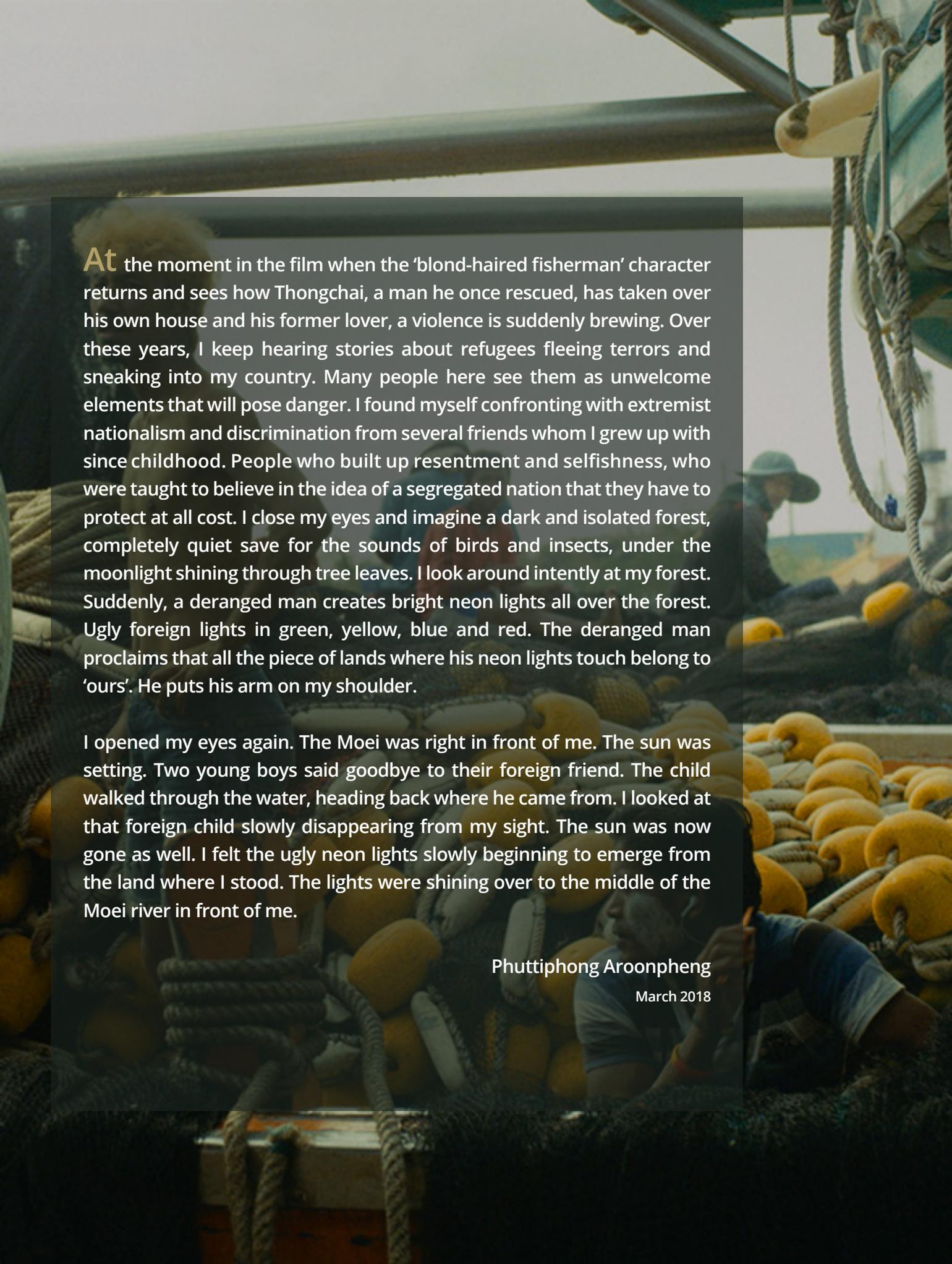


## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

**Moei River** A small body of water marking a frontier between Thailand and Myanmar. I arrived at this place in 2009, alone and excited, looking across to the Myanmar side. There was no immigration checkpoint, no patrol soldier, no barbed wires. Just a waist-deep creek separating me from crossing over. I looked ahead to the other side. A small boy emerged through a bush. He got in the water and began to swim towards my direction, my country. On my side of the shore, a couple of feet away, two other boys were joking around. They yelled out to the foreign boy to swim over and join them. I watched, as the three boys swam and played together in the Moei.

That same year, boats carrying Rohingya refugees were pushed away from the Thai shore by the authorities. Five wooden boats capsized. Three hundred Rohingyas disappeared into the ocean. I wished their fate were similar to that of 'Thongchai', the first character in my screenplay. He was wounded and washed over to the Thai shore, but alive.

In 2015, on a hill in Padang Besar, a southern Thai border town 300 metres away from Malaysia's Perlis Tunnel, a mass gravesite of Rohingyas were discovered. The cause of those deaths remains a mystery. As corpses cannot talk, things were slowly forgotten. At a pivotal scene in my film, multiple voices were heard in the forest. They are the voices of sorrow and tears. I recorded those voices from Rohingya refugees in Thailand. Their voices will not disappear and forgotten. They will continue to exist, in my film.

The background image shows a close-up view of a fishing boat's deck. Numerous yellow floats are attached to thick, dark ropes. A person wearing a green hat is visible in the background, working on the boat. The scene is set outdoors, likely on a body of water, with a clear sky. The overall tone is somewhat somber and reflective, matching the text's theme of displacement and loss.

**At** the moment in the film when the 'blond-haired fisherman' character returns and sees how Thongchai, a man he once rescued, has taken over his own house and his former lover, a violence is suddenly brewing. Over these years, I keep hearing stories about refugees fleeing terrors and sneaking into my country. Many people here see them as unwelcome elements that will pose danger. I found myself confronting with extremist nationalism and discrimination from several friends whom I grew up with since childhood. People who built up resentment and selfishness, who were taught to believe in the idea of a segregated nation that they have to protect at all cost. I close my eyes and imagine a dark and isolated forest, completely quiet save for the sounds of birds and insects, under the moonlight shining through tree leaves. I look around intently at my forest. Suddenly, a deranged man creates bright neon lights all over the forest. Ugly foreign lights in green, yellow, blue and red. The deranged man proclaims that all the piece of lands where his neon lights touch belong to 'ours'. He puts his arm on my shoulder.

I opened my eyes again. The Moei was right in front of me. The sun was setting. Two young boys said goodbye to their foreign friend. The child walked through the water, heading back where he came from. I looked at that foreign child slowly disappearing from my sight. The sun was now gone as well. I felt the ugly neon lights slowly beginning to emerge from the land where I stood. The lights were shining over to the middle of the Moei river in front of me.

Phutti Phong Aroonpheng

March 2018



## A CONVERSATION WITH PHUTTIPHONG AROONPHENG AND KONG RITHDEE

*Manta Ray* is more or less a continuation of your 2015 short film *Ferris Wheel*, which also deals with migrant workers and the porous border between Thailand and our neighbours.

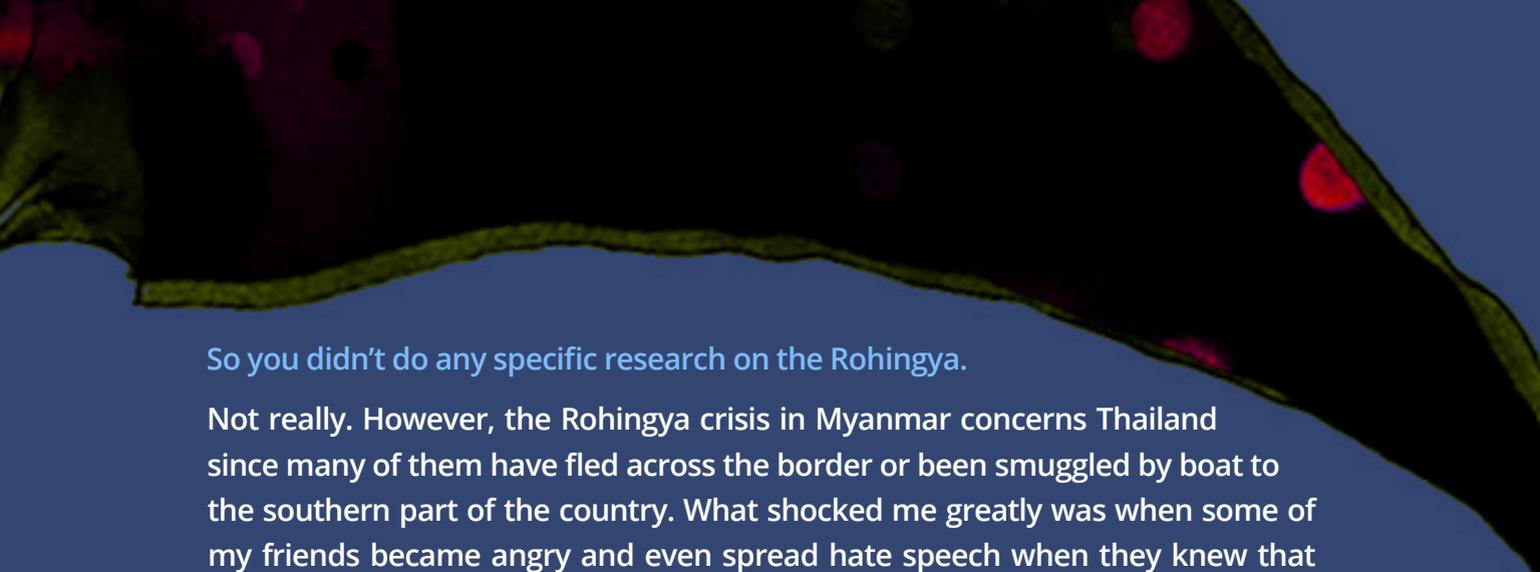
Yes. It all began, I think, in 2010 when I was on a road trip with my family to the North of Thailand. We went to Mae Sot, a bustling border town populated by Thai and Myanmar people. I drove around and I came to a small river, which marks a border between the two countries. I saw a boy playing in the river, and soon he called out to another boy who was on the other side of the shore, and he came down to play with the first boy. They were friends, I was sure, from the two sides of the river. And I thought, it's Myanmar just over there, and there's basically no border, no line that separates the two places. That image stayed with me for a long time.

My original script, which was called *Departure Day*, had two parts: the first is about a migrant worker from Myanmar who slips through the border into Thailand, and the second takes place in a fishing town and concerns the search for a true identity of a mysterious man. The first part became *Ferris Wheel*, and I've expanded the second part into *Manta Ray*.

The film centres on two characters, a Thai fisherman and a mute stranger with neither name nor speech. Given the context, we can assume (at least, for Thai audience) that this man is a Rohingya refugee, although there's nothing in the film to confirm this reading.

When I wrote the first draft of the script many years ago, the Rohingya issue wasn't in the news at all, and I hardly knew anything about the ethnic minority. Back then, I was working on a video art that looked at the question of identity and especially at the way artists found their identity through their works. From that starting point, I began to contemplate more about other implications of the term "identity": self, border, ethnicity, nationhood.

After 2010s, the Rohingya issue began to appear more in the news. But still, my interest in the problem of identity has remained on the abstract level – it's not a specific concern about any group of people, or about the past or the present in particular, but about the question of history, prejudice and the fact that we know so little about other people.



So you didn't do any specific research on the Rohingya.

Not really. However, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar concerns Thailand since many of them have fled across the border or been smuggled by boat to the southern part of the country. What shocked me greatly was when some of my friends became angry and even spread hate speech when they knew that Thailand might shelter some of these Rohingya refugees. I mean, it's normal for a lot of Thais to look down on people from our neighbouring countries that we regard as "inferior" to us – but it's just harmless arrogance in most cases. With the Rohingya, it's different, because the hatred and the racism are extreme and real. I don't know what to make of it. I know some people who used to criticize the Nazis and ethnic cleansing, but now they're the ones who can't stand the Rohingya.

Have you wondered why some of us feel such antagonism?

Maybe because we don't know enough about these people. Their history has been hidden, buried, or ignored [by their government]. We don't know them or what they have had to go through over the past century or so. And the fact that we know so little about some groups of people can be dangerous.

The stranger in the film doesn't speak. Why is that?

Because he represents a people whose voice we've never heard. I decided to make him a mute to erase his identity almost completely – we can't guess who he is from the language or the way he speaks. It's also a question of plausibility: if I let him speak, then which language? I don't want him to speak Rohingya because the film doesn't want to specify who he is. And if he speaks Thai, what kind of Thai? In the film we only hear him make a throaty sound.

How does your career as a director of photography influence your work as a director, especially in this first feature film?

Because I'm a DoP by training, I'm not confident when I have to tell a story through words, dialogue or other devices apart from the cinematography. *Manta Ray* is driven by visual and sound; it works almost like an abstract piece, or an instrumental music.

And because most of the films I've shot in my career are low-budget films, I was trained to improvise and to adapt to the situation. I didn't have the luxury of being able to design everything in advance and hoping it would turn out as I had envisioned; instead we would go to a location and see what we can do about it. So most the films I shot tend to have this look of a documentary, something slightly spontaneous, and it's the same in *Manta Ray*.

But at the same time, *Manta Ray* has a distinctive visual style. What did you have in mind as you and your DoP went into the shoot?

The idea is to film the characters through a telephoto lens. We wanted them to be seen from a distance and never from up close. We also aimed for the rough and tough realism – maybe because I've shot many commercials and they demand me to be meticulous and over-the-top, so I would like something opposite in my own film, something raw and unembellished. The script of *Manta Ray* is very slim, perhaps only 30 pages. That's because I was confident that my crew and I could create something on location – we used the script as a guideline and we could adapt to what we had in front of us. The visual style also reflects this.

Was your DoP, Nawarophaat Rungphiboonsophit, under pressure shooting a movie for you, a well-known DoP himself?

Not at all. I didn't tell him what I wanted. There's no baggage on my part or his. I've switched roles and I knew that. I only looked into the viewfinder when he was about to press the record button, that's all.

As a director, I like the idea that every member of my team should be allowed to create something from their own talents. So I let the DoP work on his own, likewise the colorist, Yov Moor, who did a great job and created something unusual for a Thai film. My editor, Lee Chatametikool too, had the freedom to explore his own ideas.

Moving aside from the visuals, the aural aspects of the film seem to also be its another notable layer. We hear a lot of meticulously-constructed scores and complex sound designs, sometimes from instruments that are difficult to identify. It sounds very different from most contemporary Thai films around.

We worked with Snowdrops, a music group from Strasbourg (France) who frequently use an instrument called Ondes Martenot. After the shooting, I listened to a number of music proposals for our score and felt very drawn to Snowdrops' works. They felt to me like a sound of experimental films from the 1950s. My personal taste, coming from a very visual-focused background, leans more towards sound design works rather than instrument-based melodies. My preferred method for scoring films is for the composer to watch the footages and comes up with a sonically equivalent proposal, on how the film should "sound" like, without any pre-determined guideline from the director. Some people can find it a difficult way to work, but I feel Snowdrops have created a very unexpected new dimension into the film.

Can you tell us a little about your three main actors, the fisherman, the stranger, and the woman?

Wanlop Rungkumjad starred in the Thai film *Eternity*, but when I approached him he said he wanted to take some time off from the film industry. But I persisted and sent him the script, and after that he agreed. The guy who plays the refugee/stranger is Aphisit Hama. We had an audition and over 30 people turned up; Aphisit was the last one we tested.

Rasmee Wayrana is a well-known singer in Thailand who fuses traditional mor lam singing with soul and jazz, creating a haunting new genre. I like her face, her eyes, and since the part requires a lot of singing, she's perfect.

For international audiences and critics, the point of reference on any Thai arthouse film is Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Your film is different from Apichatpong's in many ways, especially the formalist approach, but still the comparison seems inevitable.

I don't mind that at all! I grew up as a DoP watching and admiring Apichatpong's movies and his films certainly have an influence on me. In *Manta Ray*, there's a soldier character, another Apichatpong's signature, and critics will notice that. But if you ask me about the director who most inspired me as an artist, it's David Lynch, especially the film *Eraserhead*. I don't understand that film or even know what it is about really, but that's the kind of film I want to make.

*Kong Rithdee is the LIFE editor and film critic at Bangkok Post, and regular contributor to Cinema Scope, Film Comment, Sight and Sound and Cahiers du Cinéma*



## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Phuttiphong Aroonpheng (born 1976) studied fine arts at Bangkok's Silpakorn University. His short films have screened in festivals including Busan, Rotterdam, Hamburg and Singapore. His 2015 short, *Ferris Wheel*, screened in over 20 festivals and received 10 awards. He participated in 2009 Asian Film Academy at Busan and was also selected one of Asian Public Intellectuals fellows by the Nippon Foundation. He also works extensively as cinematographer, with credits including *Vanishing Point* (dir. Jakrawal Nilthamrong), *The Island Funeral* (dir. Pimpaka Towira) and *Dolphins* (dir. Waleed Al-Shehhi).

*Manta Ray* is his debut feature film.

## FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

*Ferris Wheel*

2015, DCP, 24 min, Experimental Fiction

*A Tale of Heaven*

2010, Super 8, 6 min, Experimental Film

*My Image Observes Your Image If It is Possible to Observe It*

2009, HD, 7 min, Experimental Film

*A Suspended Moment*

2009, HD Super 8 and 16mm, 60 min, Experimental Film

## AS CINEMATOGRAPHER

*Vanishing Point*

2015, 100 min, Directed by Jakrawal Nilthamrong,  
Thailand/The Netherlands

*The Island Funeral*

2015, 105 min, Directed by Pimpaka Towira, Thailand  
Best Cinematography, Shanghai International Film  
Festival

*Dolphins*

2014, 90 min, Directed by Waleed Al-Shehhi,  
United Arab Emirates



## MAIN CAST

### WANLOP RUNGKUMJAD

#### The Fisherman

Wanlop Rungkumjad is a veteran actor and art director in Thai independent film circle. His acting credits include *Eternity* (dir. Sivaroj Kongsakul, Tiger Award, 2011 International Film Festival Rotterdam), *36* (dir. Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, New Currents Award, 2012 Busan International Film Festival) and *The Island Funeral* (dir. Pimpaka Towira, Asian Future Award, 2015 Tokyo Film Festival). He is also the production designer of *Hi-So* (dir. Aditya Assarat, 2010 Berlinale Forum), and attended Berlinale Talents in 2014.



## **APHISIT HAMA**

Thongchai

Aphisit Hama was born and grew up in the south of Thailand. He has worked as costume designer and nightclub DJ in Bangkok and is also a trail runner in his free time. He applied to an open casting call for *Manta Ray* and was selected for the role of Thongchai. This film is his first acting experience.



## RASMEE WAYRANA

Saijai

Rasmee Wayrana is a singer and songwriter from northeast Thailand. She began singing at the age of 5 with her father, founder of *Jariang* band (Khmer folk singing). At the age of 13 she joined the local band in Isaan region. Her music is the unique mixture of traditional *Mor Lam-Jariang* cultures with Soul. She calls her singing style *Isaan Soul*. Currently living in Chiang Mai, she has collaborated with various foreign musicians Poni Hoax (France), Limousine (France), Bamako Express (Israel-Thailand), and is frequently invited to Europe to play and record music. In March 2016, She got 3 national Kom Chad Luek awards as best female singer of the year, best album *Isaan Soul* and best song *Maya*.

In December 2017, she released her second album - *Arom*. In April 2018, the song *Little Girls* was nominated for Best Recording of the Year and Rasmee Wayrana received the Best Female Artist of the Year award at Thai national Season Awards. *Manta Ray* is her first starring role.



# MUSIC

## SNOWDROPS

SNOWDROPS brings together the composer and Ondes Martenot virtuoso Christine Ott, and a lighting designer and multi-instrumentalist Mathieu Gabry.

Their work for composing original scores is based on an intimate and intuitive relationship to the images from improvised music sessions, recorded then reworked.

### CHRISTINE OTT

*"When, in 1928, Maurice Martenot creates for the first time the 'Ondes' that are to make him famous, he does not suspect that 80 years later, a small red-haired smuggler will strive to cross borders to his invention, ancestor of synthesizer." (Les Inrockuptibles).*

Christine Ott has published two albums: *Solitude Nomade* in 2009 and *Only Silence Remains* in 2016. She wrote the original music for the feature film *The End of Silence* (dir. Roland Edzard) in 2011 as well as several original scores for silent films (*Nanook of The North*, *Tabu*). She also collaborated with Yann Tiersen (on *Amélie Poulain* and *Tabarly*), Tindersticks (on *35 Shots of Rums* and *Bastards* by Claire Denis), Oiseaux-Tempête (for Léa Fehner's *The Ogres*), Syd Matters and Radiohead.

In 2016, Tindersticks, Thomas Belhom and Christine Ott performed the music for Stuart A. Staples' *Minute Bodies: The Intimate World of F. Percy Smith*, whose O.S. and DVD were published under the City Slang / BFI label.

### MATHIEU GABRY

Lighting designer during the day and musician at night (or vice versa), Mathieu Gabry is working the "light matter" and the "sound matter" by the same way. In terms of architecture and museography, he used to be project manager at Ateliers Jean Nouvel, worked with Odile Soudant (*Monumenta - Anselm Kiefer...*), then Alexis Coussement with whom he sometimes like to present as "a musical phrase" his own way of bringing in light (*PLC Lyon Confluence*, *Lascaux III...*).

In recent years, Mathieu Gabry has devoted himself mainly to music. Following his meeting with Christine Ott in 2014, they formed the SNOWDROPS duo to create music together for theatrical plays, film concerts, and forms of "immersive" concerts with a cinematographic and visual dimension, each adapted to different venues and festivals (such as the 'Opéra de Lyon' or the Archaeological Crypt of Paris).



# CAST & CREW

Main Cast:

Wanlop Rungkumjad

Rasmee Wayrana

Aphisit Hama

Writer/Director: Phutti Phong Aroonpheng

Music: Christine Ott, Mathieu Gabry (Snowdrops)

Cinematographer: Nawarophaat Rungphiboonsophit

Colorist: Yov Moor

Production Design: Sarawut Karwnamyen

Sound: Chalermrat Kaweewattana, Arnaud Rolland, Charles Bussienne

Editing: Lee Chatametikool, Harin Paesongthai

Producers: Mai Meksawan, Jakrawal Nilthamrong, Chatchai Chaiyon, Philippe Avril



Production Companies: Diversion (Thailand), Les Films de l'Étranger (France)  
In Co-Production with: Youku Pictures (China), Purin Pictures (Thailand)  
Line Production: Mit Out Sound Films artistic collective (Thailand)

Supported by: Asian Cinema Fund, Aide aux cinémas du monde  
(Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, Institut français),  
Ministry of Culture Thailand, Eurométropole de Strasbourg, Région Grand Est

The Project Participated at:  
2011 Hong Kong Asia Film Financing Forum (Hong Kong)  
2011 Produire au Sud (Nantes)



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