

WARRIOR

THE LAST EXECUTIONER

Directed by Tom Waller

Press Clippings

A shot for 'The Last Executioner'

BIOGRAPHICAL DRAMA WINS GOLDEN DOLL PRIZES ALONGSIDE "TEACHER'S DIARY" AND "I FINE ... THANK YOU"

WISE KWAI
THE NATION

SNUBBED BY THE Thai film industry's Subhanahongsa Awards, the cast and crew of "The Last Executioner" were feeling vindicated on Tuesday night after winning best picture and screenplay at the 30th Surasawadee Awards at the Thailand Cultural Centre.

Put on by the Thai Entertainment Reporters Association, the long-running movie kudos also awarded "The Teacher's Diary", ("Kid Tueng Wittaya") and "I Fine ... Thank You ... Love You". Winners received floral bouquets, with the actual prizes, the Tukkata Tong (Golden Doll) statuettes, to be presented in royally appointed ceremonies later in the year.

Directed by Tom Waller and produced by Handmade Distribution, Tiger Entertainment and De Warrenne Pictures, "The Last Executioner" ("Petchakat") had been nominated in six categories, including best director, leading actor for Vithaya Pansringarm, score by Olivier Llibouty and costumes by Panyawan Nimjareanpong.

Recounting the moral and spiritual struggles of Thai prison guard Chavoret Jaruboon, the fact-based

TUKKATA TONG WINNERS

- Best picture – "The Last Executioner"
- Director – Nithiwat Taratorn, "The Teacher's Diary"
- Actor – Sunny Suwanamethanon, "I Fine ... Thank You ... Love You"
- Actress – Preechaya Pongthananiorn, "I Fine ... Thank You ... Love You"
- Supporting actor – Pichaya Nitipaisankul, "Tai Hong Tai Hian"
- Supporting actress – Apinya Sakuljaroensuk, "Concrete Clouds"
- Screenplay – Don Linder and Katrina Grose, "The Last Executioner"
- Cinematography – Narupon Chokkanapitak, "The Teacher's Diary"
- Film editing – Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, "The Master"
- Art direction – Akraidej Kaewkote, "The Teacher's Diary"
- Costumes – "Phoobao Thai Baan: E-San Indy"
- Hair and makeup – "Tai Hong Tai Hian"
- Score – "By the River"
- Song – "Chan Ja Fan Tueng Ter" by Suphatra Inthonphakdi (Danu Huntrakul, composer), "Somboon"
- Sound – "3AM 3D Part 2"
- Special effects – "3AM 3D Part 2"
- Most popular film – "I Fine ... Thank You ... Love You"
- Film honouring the King – "The Story of Mahajanaka"
- Lifetime achievement awards – MC Chatrichalerm Yukol, Rong Kaomoonkadee, Aranya Ngarmwong, Thanit Watrothai.
- Rising stars – Thanapob Leeratanakajorn, Chonthida Asavahame
- Outstanding director – Lee Chatametikool, "Concrete Clouds"
- Popular actor – Sukrit Wisetkaew, "The Teacher's Diary"
- Popular actress – Davika Hoorne, "The Scar" ("Plae Kao")

biographical screenplay was by Chiang Mai-based American writer Don Linder and translated by Katrina Grose, a former actress who also served as associated producer.

Chavoret, portrayed by Vithaya, executed 55 death-row inmates with his rifle. He was the last to carry out the deadly deed with a firearm before the prison system switched to lethal

injection. But he also was haunted by bad karma, which took on the form of various characters, such as David Asavonond's "spirit". The cast also included Penpak Sirikul and veteran actor Jaran "See Tao" Petcharoen.

Thai-Irish director Waller was cheered by the recognition for "Executioner", which had previously won best-actor honours at last year's

Shanghai International Festival but had been passed over for awards in Thailand.

"The Surasawadi Awards are one of the oldest and most prestigious awards in Thailand, having been going on and off for 50 years," said Waller, whose first feature was 2011's "Mindfulness and Murder". "Everyone who's anyone in the Thai film industry has been nominated for one of these awards, so to win it for "The Last Executioner" is a real honour."

"The Teachers' Diary" was the leading nominee with 15 nods. In addition to best director for Nithiwat Taratorn, the GTH romantic drama about star-crossed teachers at a floating rural schoolhouse was awarded for cinematography and art direction.

Another GTH picture, the English-tutoring rom-com "I Fine ... Thank You ... Love You" took the top acting prizes. It starred Preechaya "Ice" Pongthananiorn as a celebrity English-language tutor who agrees to teach a boorish factory worker (Sunny Suwanmethanon) who wants to win back his US-based girlfriend. It had received three nominations, and in addition to the actor prizes, it was also honoured for being the top-grossing Thai film of 2014.

Other honours went to the indie financial-crisis drama "Concrete Clouds" ("Phawang Rak"), which had 11 nominations and had been a big winner at the film industry's Subhanahongsa Awards. At the Golden Dolls, Apinya Sakuljaroensuk took the supporting actress prize for her brave turn as a young woman who



From left, screenwriter Don Linder, director Tom Waller, screenwriter Katrina Grose and leading actor Vithaya Pansringarm at the Surasawadee Awards.

has a fling with a woefully naive guy in a neighbouring 1997 Bangkok apartment. Writer-director Lee Chatametikool was among a host of folks receiving special honours.

The supporting actor prize went to Pichaya Nitipaisankul from the Phranakorn studio's horror omnibus "Tai Hong Tai Hian", in which he played a former monk haunted by an ex-girlfriend. Produced by Poj Arnon,

the gory "Tai Hong Tai Hian" also won for hair and makeup.

Leaving empty handed was the romantic comedy-drama "Chiang Khan Story" ("Tukkae Rak Pang Mak"), which scored at the Bangkok Critics Assembly Awards and the 12th Kom Chad Luek Awards, and another leading nominee, the romantic drama "Timeline Jodmai Khwam Songjam".

ARTS | SPECIAL REPORT: Q. AND A.

Director Aims to Break a Barrier With Thai Film

By CHEN MAY YEE JUNE 15, 2014



Tom Waller, left, with the actress Penpak Sirikul during the filming of "The Last Executioner."
De Warrenne Pictures

Fifteen films will compete this week for the Shanghai International Film Festival's main prize, the Golden Goblet, before a jury led by the Chinese actress Gong Li. Among them is "The Last Executioner," a small-budget film from Thailand about the life of Chavoret Jaruboon, a rock'n'roll guitarist turned executioner in Bang Kwang Central prison, just north of Bangkok.

Mr. Jaruboon was not the last executioner to carry out Thailand's longtime use of the death penalty, but he was the last to use a sub-machine gun on death row inmates, who included murderers and drug traffickers, before Thailand switched to using lethal injection in 2003.

Tom Waller, 40, the film's Bangkok-based director, was interviewed by phone. Here is an edited version

of the conversation.

Q. Your new movie, "The Last Executioner," is about Thailand's most prolific executioner, Chavoret Jaruboon, who carried out 55 executions over 19 years until 2002. Why were you drawn to his story?

A. Most Thai films are comedies or ghost stories. I wanted to make a film good enough to be shown in Thailand and also internationally. This was a man who was a civil servant — an ordinary man who lived a very extraordinary life.

This is a film about karma. He was a gentle family man who undertook a very strange job of killing people for a living. It's about the conflict of him wanting to be a famous rock'n'roller yet ending up being a famous executioner. He became famous for all the wrong reasons.



Vithaya Pansringarm as Chavoret Jaruboon in "The Last Executioner." Merrill Clauche

Q. Was it based on Mr. Chavoret's 2006 autobiography, also titled "The Last Executioner"?

A. The screenplay was written by Don Linder, a New Yorker who met Chavoret and interviewed him, then stuffed away the notes in a drawer. In 2012, I saw an obituary for Chavoret in the Bangkok Post. I met Don by chance and said I have this great idea of making a movie about Chavoret Jaruboon. It was a fortuitous opportunity. Don wrote a screenplay based on recollections from Chavoret's wife Tew, his son and daughter,

and friends, as well as people who played in his band. It was not directly sourced from his autobiography.

Q. You were born in Bangkok to a Thai Buddhist mother and an Irish Catholic father. You spent your formative years in a Benedictine monastery in Yorkshire, England. Has this heritage and experience influenced the kind of films you make?

A. It has. I was at Ampleforth College, the same school that Julian Fellowes, who created "Downton Abbey," went to. I think everything you do after you come out of that institution will have some bearing on your beliefs and on religion. In Buddhism, you have karma. In Catholicism, you have guilt. My earlier films "Monk Dawson" and "Mindfulness and Murder," were about guilt and sin. This film is also about guilt and sin.

Your company, De Warrenne Pictures, also produces music videos as well as the "Survivor" franchise in Thailand and the Philippines. How does that work?

A. My day job is producing films and working for a Hollywood film company, Millennium Films. Directing is something I do in between my day job. It is very difficult to get Thai films shown around the world. I am delighted that Shanghai has decided to premiere "The Last Executioner." It shows there is an audience for this kind of film outside of Thailand.

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ME AND EARL
AND THE DYING
GIRL

Actor Vithaya Pansringarm to kill, legally

When he was last on screen, he played a karmic policeman who dishes out justice against hooligans, including one played by American actor Ryan Gosling. This time around, Vithaya Pansringarm plays a legally appointed killer in *Petchakart (The Last Executioner)*, a part for which his soulful performance won the Best Actor prize at the recent Shanghai International Film Festival in China, where the film premiered.

The Last Executioner was directed by Bangkok-based filmmaker Tom Waller. The film tells the true story of Chovaret Jaruboon, a musician-turned-prison guard who was promoted to the firing squad, in which he served until Thailand changed its execution method to lethal injection in the early 2000s.

Vithaya became well-known after starring in *Only God Forgives* opposite Gosling. He also has had supporting roles in several foreign productions shot in Thailand, including *The Hangover 3* and *Ninja: Shadow Of A Tear*.

The Last Executioner opens in Thailand on July 3.



Vithaya Pansringarm with his Best Actor award.



Image from the book, *The Last Executioner*, published by Maverick House

A new movie being released this month tells the chilling story of Chavoret Jaruboon, who executed 55 people in a 19-year career at Bang Kwang Prison. DON LINDER, who wrote the screenplay, met Chavoret and remembers in this article a man of many surprisingly good qualities

KHUN Chavoret Jaruboon executed 55 people, including one woman. And yet, I am very sorry we never got to be closer friends.

Khun Chavoret is better known as “The Last Executioner,” which is also the title of his 2006 autobiography in English. He worked at Bang Kwang Prison (sensationalized as ‘The Bangkok Hilton’ in the movie with Nicole Kidman) for 33 years, and was the executioner from 1984 to 2003.

So, 55 executions over 19 years – it wasn’t exactly like he arrived at work each day, punched the clock, and killed someone, although it certainly was an odd career.

Chavoret is known as the last executioner because he was the last person in Thailand whose job it was to carry out court-ordered executions by gun before the switchover to lethal injection, which is the method still used.

I wrote the screenplay of his life story – a story of life at its most beautiful and death at its most surreal – which will be released nationwide this month, produced by DeWarrenne Pictures.

The experience of writing the film has been almost as bizarre as the story itself. I first met Chavoret in April 2007 at the FCCT (Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand), when he was part of a panel discussion on prison life. The others on the panel were Susan Aldous, known as ‘The Angel of Bangkok’ for her work with slum children and prisoners at Bang Kwang, and the Thai owner of a travel agency arrested for money laundering.

During the evening, my overwhelming impression of Chavoret was that he was so normal. Watching him sitting there in a polo shirt and Dockers – no black hood and scythe – he looked like anyone I might sit next to on the BTS or in Starbucks.

When it came to the Q and A, the questions were unusually softball for the FCCT crowd. I ended up asking the last questions, which went something like this: “You seem like a nice guy and all, but how did you reconcile your work with your Buddhism? What did you tell your family? Did you go out for beers with the guys after executions?” (It turns out he did).

I now know that Chavoret had answered variants of these questions a thousand times before. His answers focused on karma. It was his karma to do this job, and he was compassionately helping the prisoners to achieve their karma. It was his duty, after all. At the time, this all smacked of a well devised construction of denial, or worse, an “I was just following orders” defense. I wanted to know more, so I introduced myself and asked for an interview, which his editor arranged.

A week later, I was in Chavoret’s office at Bang Kwang’s Foreign Affairs Division which he now headed. Of course, I’d read the book by then, so I knew of his background. Nevertheless, it was still very weird when, without any explanation, this 59-year-old executioner sat across his desk from me and for 30 minutes played air guitar and sang Beatles, Elvis, and Ventures songs. Then, we talked. And talked...for almost five hours.

It turns out that in his late teens and early 20s, he was a wild rock and roller, who played guitar behind his back while his drummer hung from the ceiling, and sometimes smashed his guitars. He was really cool, dressed in the tightest 60s pants and skinny ties. He and his band, Mitra, played the bars in Udon, Ubon, and Bangkok where the American GIs partied on R&R from the Vietnam War. His favorite bar was aptly named (for an executioner-to-be) “Sorry About That” in Udon.

During this time, he met his sweetheart, Khun Tew, whom he married and stayed with for 43 years until his death last year. When Khun Tew announced she was pregnant, Chavoret, whose father was a teacher, decided he needed to do the “respectable” thing and get a practical job so he could

support a family.

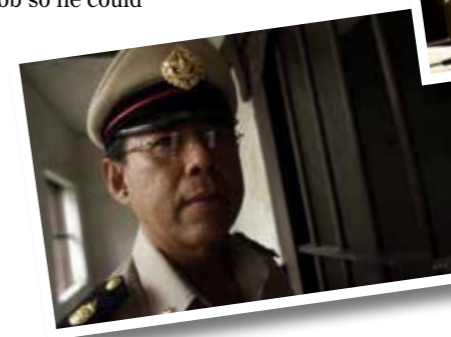
After leaving his first love (rock and roll) behind for his next love, he tried a succession of jobs – teacher, translator on an oil rig, paramedic – but none felt right. Then, a cousin told him of a civil service exam for prison guards.

Chavoret liked the guaranteed work, pension, and education benefits for his kids, so he took the exam. He didn’t plan to be an executioner. It just happened. It was his karma.

Throughout history, executions in Thailand have always been very choreographed, and often very cruel. If you go to the Correction Museum on Mahachai Road in Bangkok, you can see paintings and dioramas of Thai torture and execution methods from the Ayutthaya Period (1350-1767) to the present.

Among the 50 or so Ayutthaya Period tortures illustrated, my favourite (a strange word in this context) is when they cut off the flesh of a live prisoner, grilled it, and force fed it to him. Beheadings were the legal execution method from 1903-1934, and these were pretty grisly events involving a second person whose job it was to dance in front of the prisoner and try to distract him while his head was hacked off and then placed on a stick for all to see.

Up through the 1930s there was even a practice of locking





the prisoner into a giant hacksack ball with spikes inside and getting an elephant to roll it around.

From 1934-2003, executions were done by gun, until the switch to lethal injection.

During Chavoret's tenure at Bang Kwang, the process was – and still is – the epitome of division of labor. Chavoret started at the lowest job, and because he was such a responsible and precision-oriented worker, he rose through the ranks to when he was offered the executioner's job. It's worth going through all the jobs to know the context in which he worked.

First is the *pi liang*, whose job it is to get the prisoner from death row. Prisoners on death row are still shackled by foot 23 hours a day. There was no advanced notice about executions, so when a *pi liang* came, they all knew someone would be dead within a few hours. Next, an escort walked the prisoner, still in shackles, across the prison yard, which was full of prison personnel, doctors, government officials, and witnesses.

Next stop was the octagonal “cool pavilion,” where the prisoner met with a monk and was photographed and

fingerprinted for identification. A guard was assigned to give the prisoner a pencil and paper to write anything he wanted – a letter to his family, to the King, or to Lord Buddha, or his last will and testament.

The next job was to blindfold the prisoner, give him a lotus and some joss sticks, and walk him into the execution room under a sign which read ‘The End of All Suffering.’ (Chavoret later in life said it more correctly should have read ‘Death Chamber’).

The next job was to tie the prisoner to a standing wooden cross, so he would be facing a wall of sand bags with his back to the executioner. The prisoner was tied to this crucifix with his hands holding the lotus in front of him. The next guard positioned a standing wooden frame with a cloth screen between the prisoner and the executioner, and attached a small cardboard bulls eye target on the screen corresponding to where the prisoner's heart would be if shot from behind.

Another would wheel in the gun, check the mechanism, load the cartridges, and aim it. Finally, the executioner would enter, wai,

and ask forgiveness of the soon-to-be-executed and Mother Earth (because blood would spill on the earth), and at the drop of a red flag, he would pull the trigger.

The gun used was a machine gun. Yes. A machine gun! Chavoret told me they loaded 15 rounds, and he typically got off 9-12 rounds in bursts of three. So, the prisoner was pretty well sliced-and-diced at the end of this long dance.

About two years ago, I met Tom Waller, the film's producer/director and owner of DeWarrenne Pictures, at a mutual friend's birthday dinner. I don't remember how or why the conversation got around to executions, but it turned out that Tom had for some time wanted to do a film of the story, and I had hours of personal interaction with Chavoret, so it was a good match.

To me the core of the story has always been the archetypal struggle of the artist against his or her need for a practical self. As I wrote the film that core belief remained, fleshed out by the incredible access I've had to Chavoret's family, childhood friends, monk confidante, former band mates, and prison colleagues.

I've had access to his artifacts – amulets, shrines, mobile phone. I've even held a few of the used targets, complete with bullet holes and Chavoret's handwritten notes on the back. Mostly, I've gained insight into how strongly karma and the spirit world are very real dimensions of daily Thai life, including Chavoret's.

From my meetings with him and those around him, it is clear that Chavoret was a gentle, funny, caring, and very family oriented man. Khun Tew was truly the love of his life, and he would sacrifice anything in order to provide a better life for his daughter and two sons, and the granddaughter he loved so much. His family, whom I've met many times, are among the nicest and most well-adjusted people I have ever known.

Chavoret was also a very calm guy. His typical pose, in any type of situation be it at his desk, on a television interview, or lecturing a group of students, was with his hands clasped in front of his belly – that is, when he wasn't knocking out some rock and roll riffs. He loved to eat, especially German food – his favourite was pigs' knuckle – and he loved to drink, but he was by no means a drunk.

He played guitar throughout his life, and he loved karaoke, but was terrible at singing Thai songs. His favourite karaoke song was Sinatra's ‘My Way.’ He also loved American folk music, and American country and western (he sang a lot of Hank Williams). If he had ever gone to a shrink, he would have been diagnosed with OCD – he was extremely detailed

and ordered (before an execution, he would come home, take a bath, nap, and put on a clean, freshly pressed uniform).

I've discussed the moral and ethical dimensions of his work with him and those around him, including Phra Ajarn Boonnam, his confidante. Basically, it boils down to karma and duty.

When specifically asked if he feared he'd built up bad karma, he explained to me that karma depends on intent, and Chavoret had no murderous intent. “He was an executioner, not a killer,” he told me.

Chavoret also had an incredible sense of duty, primarily to his family, but also to his superiors. When I asked if he could have refused the offer to become executioner, he said “absolutely not.” Besides, he received an extra 2,000 baht for each execution, and that money could help his family.

There is a kind of karmic irony to the story. When Chavoret retired about four years ago, he and Tew envisioned an easy life ahead. Shortly after, he developed cancer – first of the intestine and then of the brain – and much of his last years were very painful. He never gave up, though. Together, he and Phra Boonnam lectured on the dangers of drugs and criminal life, Chavoret appeared on endless television interviews, including a bizarre appearance on a game show modeled after the American show ‘To Tell the Truth,’ and he wrote two books in English and four in Thai.

The final dimension of this story is the spirit world, which as a Westerner, I've come to realize is as real to some

Thais as the silverware. Although Chavoret was not a religious man (he considered himself very spiritual), he did take measures to protect himself from the spirits of the executed and from Yama, the Spirit of Death, who plagued him his whole life.

I understood that in order to write the story, I had to practice a lot of willing suspension of disbelief and make karma and spirits a natural and seamless part of the narrative. Maybe it isn't such a stretch considering that Chavoret told me a story of his 15th birthday when his father gave him his first guitar and took him to a monk fortune teller. “Your fate is to work with death,” he was told.

In the film, the actor Vithaya Pansringarm, who recently appeared in ‘Only God Forgives’ and in the DeWarrenne Pictures’ ‘Mindfulness and Murder,’ delivers an incredible performance in which he virtually transforms himself into Chavoret Jaruboon.

David Asavanond gives a stunning performance as The Spirit, moving seamlessly through various manifestations of Death, always keeping it real even in the most surreal situations. And, look for Duangjai Hirunsri's performance as the only woman Chavoret executed, ironically also named Duangjai.

The last thing I remember Chavoret telling me is, “We Thais believe in destiny and fate. I believe in karma.”

Chavoret Jaruboon died on 30 April 2012 at the age of 64.





Tom Waller, right, on set



A young Chavoret in the film



The poster for the film

GUNS AND KARMA

In *The Last Executioner*, Vithaya Pansringarm plays Chavoret Jaruboon, a death-row prison guard who remains a devoted family man. BY JOE CUMMINGS



Chavoret Jaruboon, the last employee of Thailand's corrections system to carry out the death sentence by gun, enjoyed an unlikely pre-prison career as a wayward rock and roller who played guitar in bands entertaining American GIs on R&R in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

When the young Chavoret fell in love and started a family, he traded in his troubadour lifestyle for that of a uniformed guard at Bangkok's harshest prison, Bang Kwang. All prisoners at the infamously nicknamed 'Bangkok Hilton' wear leg irons for the first three months of their sentences, while death row inmates wear irons permanently welded around their ankles.

When a state executioner retired in the 1980s, Chavoret found himself cradling a deadly 9mm automatic rifle instead of a guitar. Peering down the barrel of the gun,

which was fitted with a silencer and mounted on a stand, the devoted family man eventually executed 55 people, including three women, firing up to 15 bullets through their backs and into their hearts.

Although not a religious man – Chavoret was born to a Muslim mother and Buddhist father who had three wives – he nevertheless struggled with the ethics of carrying out his duty, and made heroic efforts to keep his family sheltered from the everyday stress, which included incidents where executions went wrong, and death came slowly and painfully.

When the state changed the execution method to lethal injection, Chavoret retired, and became something of a celebrity in Thailand as a talk-show guest and author of several books on his time at Bang Kwang, including a comprehensive biography in English called *The Last*

Executioner. Sadly, the ex-executioner didn't enjoy his retirement and fame for very long. He ordained as a Buddhist monk to atone for his grisly career, but died soon after being diagnosed with stomach cancer.

Such a unique life makes perfect movie material, and after producer-director Tom Waller finished reading the straightforward and, at times, chilling account of Chavoret's transformation from rocker to state-sanctioned killer, he moved quickly to request film rights from Chavoret's family.

"How does a man given the task of taking so many lives reconcile with his karma?" Waller muses when asked why he decided to direct the film. "That's what initially interested me most in making a film inspired by his story."

"After speaking to his widow and family, I realised there were different layers to this man."

"Not only was he a dutiful servant of the state, but he was also a wonderful husband and a loving family man. Raising his family was the reason he entered the prison service in the first place. It paid more bills than playing the guitar would but working at Bang Kwang prison ultimately

led to living with demons inside his head."

Waller commissioned New York-born, Chiang Mai-based writer and editor Don Linder for the screenplay. Before he met Waller, Linder had attended one of Chavoret's public appearances, where he asked him a series of tough questions on karma and Buddhism.

"I spent months interviewing a wide range of people associated with Chavoret," says Linder about how he prepared for writing the script. "His family – his widow Khun Tew, his daughter Chulee, and his sons – were incredibly generous with their time and gave me access to all kinds of photos and artefacts, including some of the actual cardboard bullseye targets, complete with bullet holes and Chavoret's notes on the back."

"I also interviewed the drummer in his first band, his childhood friends and a monk who was his confidant. Besides reading all his books in English and articles about him, I viewed about 50 hours of video covering TV interviews, news programmes, morning talk shows, home videos and even a game show."

Actor Vithaya Pansringarm – who in the highly stylised ▶▶



Chavoret with his wife in the film

Ryan Gosling vehicle *Only God Forgives* portrayed a sword-wielding policeman who slices evil characters according to their misdeeds – was an obvious choice to take on the Chavoret role.

Now in his 50s, Pansringarm had worked with Waller before as the lead in *Mindfulness and Murder*, playing an ex-cop Buddhist abbot who investigates corruption and murder in his Bangkok monastery. Based on an English-language novel by author Nick Wilgus, Waller transformed the story into a Thai-language film which won Best Director for Waller, Best Actor for Pansringarm and Best Supporting Actor for Wannasak Sirilar at the ThrillSpy International Film Festival in Washington, DC in 2010.

In fact it was while travelling together to a Siberian film festival in support of *Mindfulness and Murder* that Waller and Pansringarm first talked about making a film based on Chavoret's life. This was well before Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn cast Pansringarm in *Only God Forgives*.

Asked about the similarities between Chang, the character he played in *Only God Forgives*, and Chavoret in *The Last Executioner*, Pansringarm says: "Neither character kills out of hate or anger, but rather out of a sense of responsibility. They are trained killers, but they remain humble and duty-bound."

The soft-spoken Pansringarm, who holds a fifth-degree black belt in kendo and trains regularly with Thailand's kendo association, could be talking about himself.

Music also links both characters with the actor. Chang, the angel of death in *Only God Forgives*, hits the karaoke stage during his down time and in *The Last Executioner* Chavoret is not only seen playing in bands as a young man

but continues to sing at prison events and karaoke clubs. IndieWire's *The Playlist* cited Pansringarm's karaoke scenes in *Only God Forgives* as one of the top movie music moments of 2013.

"I played guitar when I was younger, and I like to sing, so I was comfortable handling the musical parts for both films," Pansringarm says.

Penpak Sirikul, notorious in the 1980s for her sultry, erotic glamour photos, and more recently acclaimed as an exemplary actress in such Thai films as *It Gets Better* (2012), plays Chavoret's wife.

Talking about Sirikul's contributions to *The Last Executioner*, accomplished amateur chef Pansringarm makes a culinary comparison.

"You know how the addition of saffron to certain dishes takes them to a whole new level? Just a little bit completely transforms the overall flavour, adding colour and class. That's what Penpak did for our film. She's a veteran actor and was very professional."

A character that shadows Chavoret throughout the film, appearing in various guises, visible only to the executioner and muttering morally pointed, sarcastic one-liners over his shoulder, is played with relish by Thai-French actor David Asavanond. Asavanond wowed audiences in 2012 with his screen-chewing portrayal of a sadistic, drug-dealing hipster named Jesus in the New York-set horror-thriller *Countdown*. The role earned him the Best Actor award at the 2012 Thai National Film Awards.

Moving towards international recognition and distribution, De Warrenne Pictures is sending the film to compete in several prominent international festivals. *The Last Executioner* will premiere in Thailand June 19, 2014.

BK+

FILM

COMING SOON! by Thitipol Panyalimpanun



The Last Executioner

The Last Executioner

This film written by Don Linder and directed by Tom Waller will see Vithaya Pansringarm, who you might remember for his ruthless role in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Only God Forgives*, continue to make life hard for many, though in a totally different fashion. In *The Last Executioner*, which draws inspiration from a true story, he portrays Chavoret Jaruboon, a former rock n' roller whose destiny sees him switch professions and become Thailand's last prison executioner to use the gun to dispatch his victims. He's joined by a seasoned cast of Penpak Sirikul, David Asavanond, Pisarn Akraseranee and Nirut Sirichanya. The movie is said to touch on the law of karma and will be in local cinemas this June.

'The Last Executioner': Shanghai Review

2:37 PM PDT 6/16/2014 by Elizabeth Kerr

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By Mikoyang Picturage

The Bottom Line

Non-grim and wholly human exploration of death and duty.

Venue

Shanghai International Film Festival

Director

Tom Waller

Cast

Vithaya Pansringarm, Penpak Sirikul, David Asavanond

Thai star Vithaya Pansringarm anchors producer-director Tom Waller's unconventional biopic.

Based on the true life of the last man in Thailand, Chavoret Jaruboon, to hold the job of carrying out executions by rifle, the fittingly titled *The Last Executioner* is a lush, sometimes surreal, occasionally lurid biography of a good man in an ugly world. Thai-born producer-director **Tom Waller** crafts a stylish and fundamentally fascinating portrait of the personal toll a gruesome social service (of a sort) takes on one's humanity, even though writer **Don Linder**'s script could easily have delved much deeper into Chavoret's character and conflicted morality. The film should do well at home in Thailand on the back of **Vithaya Pansringarm**'s (*Only God Forgives*) rising profile and possibly in other parts of Asia on the art house circuit. Broad-spectrum festival play is almost guaranteed.

RECOMMENDED



Director Neill Blomkamp on New 'Alien' Film: It Will Ignore Last Two...



Jared Leto Joins Kim Kardashian in the Platinum-Blond Club



'Blurred Lines' Trial Reveals How Much Money Robin Thicke's Song Made

PHOTOS 35 of 2014's Most Anticipated Movies

The film begins with a retired, and possibly dying Chavoret, or Chow, being interviewed on a Charlie Rose-type talk show as well as dealing with his demons on a garish game show. We learn that Chow is the last firing squad executioner at Bangkok's notorious Bang Kwang Prison, and that he stepped down from his execution team job when the prison switched to lethal injection (a bargain at only 200 Baht per death). The film then settles into more conventional biopic mode, as it traces his life, from his days as budding rock star (he was guitarist in a band called the Helmet Heads) before meeting the woman who would become his wife. When Tew (played as an older woman by **Penpak Sirikul**) gets pregnant, Chow knows it's time to find responsibility and applies for a job as prison guard at Bang

Kwang. Once there, the job becomes a career and he eventually rises in the ranks to chief of executions, which are carried out by firing squad—at first rifle, then automatic weapon—until the early 2000s. After retiring, Chow is diagnosed with colon cancer, and his final years are ones of reflection.

PHOTOS Summer's Big Movies Reimagined With Donald Sterling, Sultan of Brunei (Cartoon)

The Last Executioner balances a number of seemingly conflicting tones, which Waller largely manages deftly. Perhaps Chow's defining moment—when a rifle jams and the execution squad repeatedly aims and misfires at the condemned man—is pitch black it's so dark in its humor and *The Spirit* (**David Asavanond**) ping pongs between joking court jester and deadly serious avatar for Chow's conscience. The film is violent without being overly graphic; it's difficult to avoid blood in a film about deaths by gunfire, a hideous bungled double execution in particular. Cinematographer **Wade Muller**'s visuals are frequently arresting, with Bangkok's lush environment ironically concealing the gruesome goings-on at Bang Kwang and more than a few saturated images underscoring the absurdity and complexity of Chow's job.

Swift moving with snapping shots and editing, the whole thing would collapse in a miasma of cool pictures without Vithaya's central performance, a model of quiet ordinariness. As a good man in a corrupt system (he's warned early on not to rock the boat at Bang Kwang) and later in a horrible job ("I was an executioner, not a murderer" he emphasizes on the talk show), he flits between hangdog sadness when his work follows him home, much to the chagrin of Tew to radiant glee when watching Elvis DVDs with his granddaughter. Vithaya makes the occasional doubts and internal struggle to reconcile his job with his beliefs is always palpable but never overwhelming. He is a product of this system and he knows it. Penpak and **Thanyarat Praditthaen** as his daughter Chulee do their share of developing Chow as a devoted husband and father, but this is Vithaya's film start to finish.

14 CINEMA

BIOPIC TAKES NO PRISONERS

Apart from a few flourishes of the spiritual kind, 'The Last Executioner' tends to stick to the facts about a conflicted man By Jim Algie

Conflicted characters make for some of the best protagonists and engines for dramatic tension. Few public figures in recent Thai history were as conflicted as the late Chavorn Jaraboon. Thailand's last executioner dispatched 53 men and two women during almost 20 years on the firing line at Bang Khwang Central Prison. At the same time, he was a practicing Buddhist, a prison reformer, a family man and sporadic drinker with a thirst for beer and whiskey.

A new Thai film called *The Last Executioner*, which opened last week, aims to cover this man of multiple faces with an overacting plot that spans his entire life.

Obsessed with early rock 'n' roll, especially Elvis Presley, the young Chavorn began playing guitar as a boy. By his bell-ringing teenage years he spotted a postcard and was tearing the cloth of bars and clubs to cover hands embracing US troops in Thailand.

Some early scenes in the film riff on those experiences, with Thira Chantid playing the aspiring musician. For a low-budget indie movie, these flashbacks to the '50s are impeccably detailed with all the old fashions, clothes and dances, while Bangkok teens rockers the Helmsheads play the band.

Then turns *I've So Happy*, a take on the Beatles' upbeat pop, becomes a theme song in Chavorn's life. Dying to his first execution later he will put that song on the stereo and sing along. It's not a moment of mirth, however. Nor is it litaged with that happy-thus-thus kind of irony. Thira's love to employ. It's more like a reverberation of youthful yearning and an echo of his past life. Regrets and remorse are other key notes in this story.

At one of his gaps, Chavorn meets Jess. Their courtship lasts about a minute on screen. Whatever sparks were kindled between them, besides the rancors of physical attraction, are quickly extinguished as the couple see each other in bed. That scene, of loving caresses and interlocking limbs illuminated by soft-focus lighting, is one you've seen before in a few dozen romantic comedies. This is not a melodrama, though. Chavorn's music career is quickly sidelined in favor of his new job as a prison guard. Against his will and fiercer instincts, it's a job he takes on reluctantly to support his family.

For a biopic, this is all very accurate. Indeed,



DEADLY DUTY: Vithaya Pansringarm as executioner Chavorn Jaraboon.

director Tom Waller and screenwriter Don Linder, after meeting by accident at a dinner party, have buzzed fast over fiction, but not at the expense of dramatic economy.

Sitting in his office at De Wazzarino Pictures in Bangkok, Waller said, "After Chavorn passed away [in April, 2012] Don and I approached the family to get their permission to make a film about him, based on the family's recollections of him and from material we gathered from the public domain and historical sources, and also from government sources like the Department of Corrections."

The screenwriter, he said, also used notes from his interviews with Chavorn's former score of his old colleagues and baristas to ferret for those scraps of material. "So Don had to cobble together all those interviews and third-hand sources into the screenplay," Waller said.

In spite of all the realistic details, Waller did not want to make a documentary. Even the flash-forwards to Chavorn appearing on chat shows and quiz programmes have been reworked with rising star Vithaya Pansringarm playing him in his later years when he became an unlikely celebrity.

Biopics require a great deal of compression so a person's entire life can be condensed and distilled into 90 or 100 minutes. Inevitably, some of Chavorn's complexities had to be left out of the film. His final position at Bang Khwang as the Chief of Foreign Affairs, overseeing more than 700 foreign inmates, is not mentioned. Nor is his role as a facilitator for programmes to help prisoners with contracts, and Albie, 38



THE GHOSTS OF GUILT

Perhaps the most ingenious invention in Linder's screenplay is the presence of three men who are gradually revealed to be the ghosts of Chavorn's guilt and the voices of his conscience: sometimes mocking and sometimes menacing, the main tormenter is played with panache by David Asavonand, a French-Thai actor who won three major awards for best actor in Thailand for his role in *Goodbye*, when he played a psychopathic drug dealer supplying Thai teenagers with high times and low times during a New Year's Eve party in New York.

His scenes in *The Last Executioner* are not executed with any over-the-top histrionics, nor campy sound effects or villainous cackles.

As Linder explained it, the inspiration for these made-believe menaces came from Thai folklore and some of the protagonist's personal experiences. Borrowed from Hinduism, Yama is the lord of the dead and the judge of the deceased. He has two assistants.

On his deathbed, Chavorn saw three otherworldly figures approaching him. That anecdote, played by his loved one to Linder, was one of the reasons crediting the screenwriter's decision to portray these surreal creatures in a realistic way. The other was a story Chavorn told him about a visit to a fortune-teller at an early age when she said his life's work would revolve around death.

During his research, the Chiang Mai-based screenwriter came upon two websites where Thai released their near-death experiences in English. "What came out of those was fascinating, that Yama and his assistants are like mortal guys. And in one near-death experience they talk about them taking someone into an office building and up on an elevator. That helped me put it in perspective, that it was just real stuff. And so David's character evolved as a haunting character but somebody who is also real."

MANY FACES

To play such a multifaceted character as the late executioner, Vithaya faced the most daunting challenge of his four-film career. His previous roles as a crime-solving monk in *Mindfulness and Murder*, and as a sword-wielding, karaoke-loving policeman in *Only God Forgives*, starring Ryan Reynolds, required little in the way of emotional elasticity. They were static characters, sullen and introverted, who remained a little thin even as the plots thickened and the action broiled.

Besides sharing a few physical characteristics, Vithaya and Chavorn share a more important quality: cool facades masking warm personalities. In person, the gregarious actor, who helps to run a ballet studio with his American wife in Bangkok, preposes the exact opposite of the taciturn tough guy he plays on screen.

Alternately cocky and modest, amusing and earnest, the actor embodies many of the qualities that made the movie's protagonist such a compelling character.

To get into the part, he read the executioner's memoirs and studied DVDs of his interviews. He noted how Chavorn wore his watch on different wrists at different times, and how his lower lip protruded a bit when he was interviewed, as a way to delve deeper into the role.

Before the first day of filming began, he called Chavorn's only daughter, Chudee, to request that she ask her father's spirit for his blessing. "I got so much positive energy and inspiration from her love for her father," he said over coffee at a Thong Lee cafe not far from his family's Bang Sui Dance Studio.

Vithaya has no formal training as a trouper. Unheard of in the Thai film business, he did not land his first major part until he was almost 30.

He credits some unusual sources for influencing his acting style: studying legends, the

art of Japanese sword fighting for almost 30 years; working for a decade in marketing and distribution with Amway products; and "Look at this 55-year-old face with all the holes in it. It's like an old tyre," he laughed. "When they were doing my make-up on the first day, they tried to make my face look smooth. Tom Waller came past and told them to leave all the holes showing." He laughed again.

Vithaya's powerful performance was lauded at the Shanghai International Film Festival, where he won the Golden Goblet for Best Actor. The movie, meanwhile, made it to the final 15 for Best Film. After dunking the jury and the cast and crew, he hosted the award ceremonies and, speaking in Thai, offered it to Chavorn. (The man who grew up wanting to be a rock star would have been thrilled by this sprinkling of stardust on his posthumous legend.)

One of Vithaya's finest moments in *The Last Executioner* comes when a young man is executing his three teenage daughters. Chavorn enters using the acoustic guitar as a marching drum and asks the victim, in a half-mocking, half-serious way, if he knows what time of work he's on. It's the kind of bang-in characterisation that those of us who knew him will cherish in the greatest artistic form, being a bit scary and fiercely protective of his family all at once.

TRUE CRIME CENTREPIECE

The centerpiece of the film, which also became an important component of Chavorn's 2006 English language autobiography, *The Last Executioner*, is based on a true case of kidnapping in rural Thailand that went horribly wrong after the young boy died.

Both the kidnappers were sentenced to death. The man confessed but the woman, her name has been changed to Duangjai, claimed she was innocent. This is the film's most harrowing scene. Then as they are led

SHOOTING THE STORY: Left, director Tom Waller and crew members on the set of 'The Last Executioner'. Right, Vithaya Pansringarm as Chavorn Jaraboon



Look at this 55-year-old face with all the holes in it. It's like an old tyre

VITHAYA PANSRINGARM

into the death chamber he screams that she is innocent as Duangjai weeps and pleads for clemency. The execution goes as badly as the kidnapping. This is not an excessively gory film, but Waller and Wade Mallet, the director of photography, make sure that the Buddhist rituals and bloodiness are depicted in a take-no-prisoners way. Referring to his Thai death row in the Christian state of Texas — the condemned men and women are led in white blindfolded and holding three sticks of incense, a blue blossom and candle, as if they were going to pray at a temple.

For the first time in the film and in real life, Chavorn develops a cry of doubt about the legal system that turns madrigals in his



FACTBOX

Born in Thailand to an Irish father and Thai mother, Tom Waller is an international film-maker and film producer. In Thailand, he's best known for his second film, *Mindfulness and Murder* (2010), which was nominated for Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Film at the Subhanahongsa Awards. Tom's latest feature, *The Last Executioner* [fb.com/thelastexecutioner], is based on the life of the late Chavoret Jaruboon. Chavoret was Thailand's last man to use a sub-machine gun on death row inmates at Bang Kwang Central Prison before the capital punishment method was changed to lethal injection. Vithaya Pansringarm of *Only God Forgives* plays him in the film, which was selected as one of 15 nominations for The Golden Goblet of the Shanghai International Film Festival last week where Vithaya won Best Actor. Tom talks to us about *The Last Executioner*, which will hit Thai cinemas on Jul 3.

Lights, camera, Waller

WHEN DID YOU DISCOVER YOUR PASSION FOR FILM-MAKING?

I was eight years old when I saw *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* made by Steven Spielberg and have wanted to make movies ever since. My father had a Super 8 film camera and projector which I used to borrow to make my own little films and show them to friends.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO TURN THE LIFE OF CHAVORET JARUBOON INTO A MOVIE?

I read about Chavoret in his obituary in the *Bangkok Post* in 2012. For a man whose dream was to be a rock 'n' roll guitarist, he seemed to become famous for all the wrong reasons. I thought it would be a great story for a film, and since there are so many Thai horror and comedy movies, I wanted to make something completely different that no one had seen before in Thai cinema.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING A BIOPIC?

It's important not to stray too far away from the essence of the real person, although in a movie you have to make your own interpretations of the character to make it more interesting for the audience. Finding actors who could convincingly play Chavoret as a young and older man was tricky, as you have to suspend your disbelief that these two actors are really portraying the same person. Also, despite getting permission to film at Bang Kwang prison, we were prohibited from bringing actors inside for filming.

DID YOU EXPERIENCE ANY STRANGE EPISODES WHILE MAKING THE FILM?

It was eerie walking into the real execution chamber at Bang Kwang to do our research. We then painstakingly recreated the room for filming purposes. Every time the actor Vithaya Pansringarm put on that uniform and stepped onto that set, I believe he really became Chavoret Jaruboon.

HOW HAS THE AUDIENCE FEEDBACK FOR THE FILM BEEN SO FAR?

We had our world premiere in Shanghai last week and it was very well received. I believe the film is very accessible to both Thai and international audiences. I made the film for everyone to see, not just in Thailand [but] I'd like to know what Thai audiences will think of the film.

DO YOU HAVE A MESSAGE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN SEEING THE FILM?

This is a very unique Thai film, possibly like no other. It deals with the inner struggle of an ordinary man who led an extraordinary life, fulfilling his duty to the state in executing death row prisoners, as well as coming to terms with the good and bad karma of his actions. Please go see the film in the cinema to enjoy the big screen experience! 🎬



Photos by Paul Hutton

Vithaya "Pu" Pansringarm plays Chavoret Jaruboon

THE LAST EXECUTIONER

New Tom Waller Film Due for Release

Inspired by true events, *The Last Executioner* is the story of one ordinary man's journey through life, death, duty and karma.

Chavoret Jaruboon was the last person in Thailand whose job it was to execute by gun.

A wild rock and roller in his youth who played the GI bars during the Vietnam War, he took a job as a prison guard to support the family he was devoted to.

He spent the rest of his life struggling to reconcile the good and bad karma that came from that decision and the 55 lives he took in 19 years as an executioner at the infamous Bang Kwang Central Prison, "The Bangkok Hilton."

On Chavoret's 11th birthday, coinciding with JFK's assassination, his father, a teacher, bought him his first guitar and he immediately started playing Elvis riffs.

Later in the day, they went to see a fortune-teller who made the prediction of karma that shapes the rest of his life and the lives of all those around him: "Your fate is to work with death."

In the 1960s, while playing manic rock and roll at a bar, he meets Tew, a local girl, with whom he falls in love and will share the rest of his life. Facing the archetypal dilemma of the artist who feels the need to do something respectable, Chavoret trades his guitar for a prison guard's baton, although rock and roll remains near and dear to him until the day he dies.

After fourteen years of working his way up through the prison ranks and impressing the authorities with his solid work ethic, sense of duty, and 'jai yen' (coolness), Chavoret is offered the job of head executioner when the old executioner suddenly retires.

Although haunted by the prophesy from his youth, especially in the form of the Spirit, a good-looking, well-dressed guy who seems to



David Asavanond plays The Spirit

show up everywhere in Chavoret's life, he accepts the job – after all, it pays an extra 2,000 baht per execution. Chavoret is extremely professional – almost nonchalant – at his first execution. Chavoret continues to live a divided life. One as a killer and the other as a devoted family man whose music is always his saving grace.

His blind faith in the judicial process, his duty, and most of all his karma seems to allow him to keep the two lives separated, with the help of very prescribed personal rituals before, during, and after each execution.

But sometimes the wall between them begins to crack. He is uncharacteristically shaken up by his first and only execution of a woman, who in a surreal and perhaps prophetic scene, dies twice.

His life continues as a weird see-saw between karma/killing on the one hand, and karma/family life on the other. He continues to execute with precision and purpose, yet he also enjoys nights out of karaoke and German food with his wife.

He can coolly pull the trigger on the same day he plays with his granddaughter, whom he absolutely adores. Through it all, The Spirit continues to dog him, appearing in perfectly normal settings, more and more with two other seemingly common guys.

Chavoret eventually becomes a minor celebrity – writing books, attending embassy parties, doing endless print and TV interviews, educating students, and even appearing on a TV game show, a Thai version of the old American show, "To Tell the Truth."

When Tom Met Don

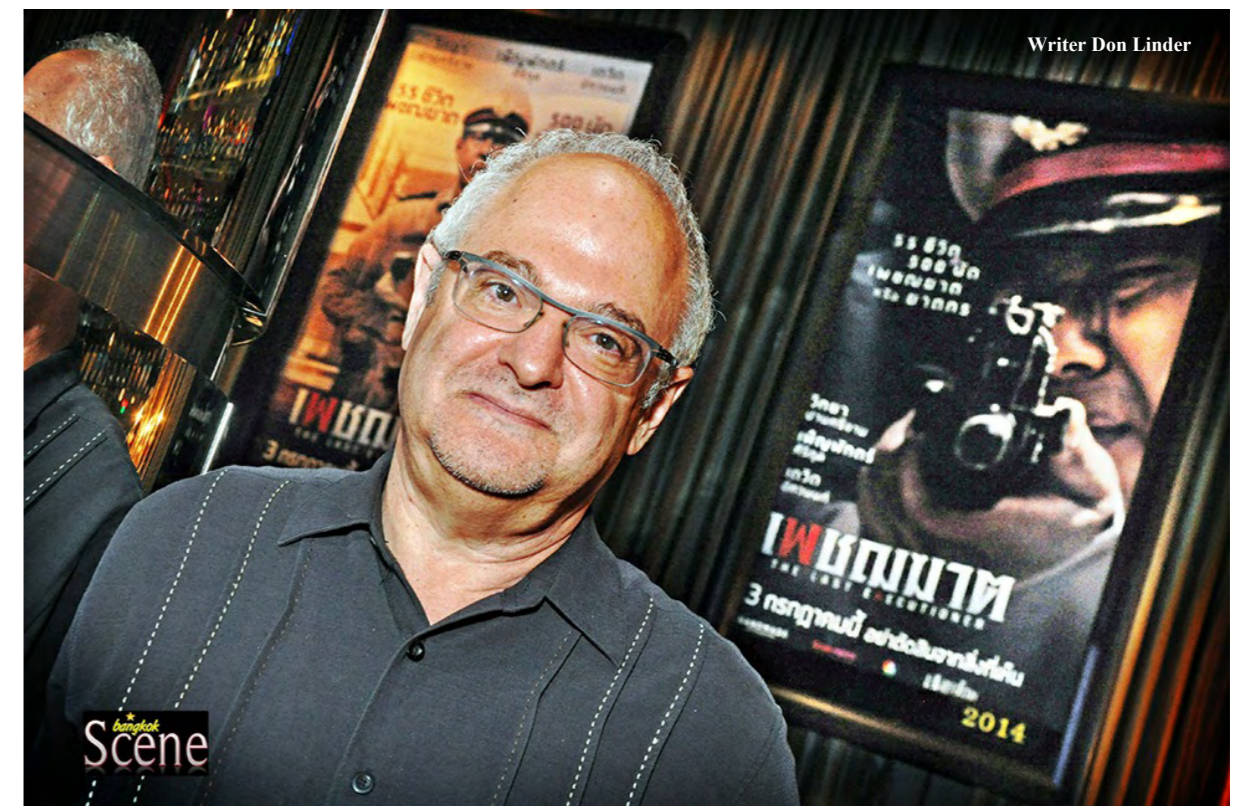
Scriptwriter Don Linder interviewed Chavoret extensively after first meeting him in 2007. Several years later, Tom Waller (director/producer) and Don, who didn't know each other, were seated across from each other at a mutual friend's 50th birthday party.

How the conversation got around to executions is anybody's guess – perhaps it was karma – but on that night the film was born.

After many months of interviews with Chavoret's family, childhood friends, Buddhist monk confidantes, and even the drummer and his 94-year-old mother who formed Chavoret's first band, the script was ready and filming commenced.



Director Tom Waller



Writer Don Linder



the grapevine

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PICK OF THE WEEK



THE LAST EXECUTIONER

(Premiered Jul 3)

Think your nine to five job is bad? How about one that requires you to take the lives of convicted criminals? Liberating some might say, but every job has its ups and downs. The story is based on the memoir of Chavoret Jaruboon (Vithaya Pansringarm), a young rock 'n' roll star whose life is turned upside down after he swaps his guitar for a gun. Taking on a more "respectable" job as an executioner to support his family, the film looks into the surreal and gruesome world of a good man trapped in a corrupt system. Directed by Tom Waller.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, **ACTION**

Producer, director, Buddhist, Catholic, Irishman, Thai.

Tom Waller is all of these things (and more), and has figured out how to make it work to his advantage.

CAMERON COOPER meets up with him

TOM WALLER HAS two of everything, it seems. Two passports, two parallel careers, two production companies, two religions, two languages... (He even has two kids, as it happens.)

Meeting Tom for the first time at his house-based office tucked away in one of the back mazes of Sukhumvit, I had wondered what sort of accent to expect. Though Tom was born in Thailand to a Thai mother and an Irish father, his formative education was handled by Benedictine monks at a monastery school in Yorkshire in the UK.

In fact, his accent is relatively international, though sporting some soft Queen's English 'Rs' with very pronounced diction.

Like most *luk krung*, Tom is the product of two cultures handed down from his parents, plus the inescapable influence of embracing the differing mentalities of speaking two languages from early life. But what does he consider himself to be?

"Since I was educated in the UK, I guess you'd say I'm 90 percent Westerner and 10 percent Thai - well, unless it suits me to be otherwise. I understand the Thai mentality and can adapt to it readily."

His talent for doing so is a large part of his job, since he owns and runs two production companies - DeWarrenne Pictures and Tiger Entertainment - the former providing full movie production services in Thailand to Western filmmakers and the latter doing similar work domestically, as well as developing new film projects, with several currently in the works.

Most recently, Tom has been acting as the line producer (running the logistics of day-to-day movie production) for the Hollywood film *Mechanic: Resurrection*, the sequel to the 2011 hit, *The Mechanic*. The film stars Jason Statham,

Jessica Alba, Tommy Lee Jones and Michelle Yeoh, so he is breathing the rarefied Hollywood air on this project.

Tom is matter of fact about his primary occupation. "It is cool to walk down the street with Jessica Alba," he says, "but producing is my 'day job' that pays the bills and enables me to do my directing projects."

Directing, Tom's true passion, began at the monastery, where his entrepreneurial spirit also first showed itself.

"I started filming sporting and other events around the school. I discovered that parents wanted copies of those their kids had participated in, so we started selling them. We used the money to buy more advanced equipment - like Super VHS," he laughs.

He also took part in a school film society that held screenings of major films on the school's ancient 35mm projector, which is where his love of cinema really began.

Later, through his Irish grandfather ("even in the West, nepotism goes a long way"), he landed an internship with Irish television, travelling around the Emerald Isle filming sporting events and learning the craft.

"Unlike a friend at school who had a vocation to be a monk, I had a vocation to become a filmmaker, which is similarly tough, because you are stuck with this 'illness' for life. But it is almost impossible to monetize this passion. So, like a monk, you have to give up all your worldly possessions, because as a filmmaker you are always broke."

At the tender age of 23, Tom managed to raise the funding and crew to make his first feature debut, *Monk Dawson*, a tale of moral conflict set





"It's been a career-long dream to make a film about Siam in the 17th century, when the Kingdom resisted European colonisation; an East-meets-West adventure in the grand tradition. I'm hoping that will be the movie to put us firmly on the Hollywood map"

in the 70s about a Catholic priest's fall from grace. The theme drew a line nicely under his past, and saw airplay on BBC UK and other countries.

The film "managed to claw back enough to not embarrass the investors... but I learned a lot - that was my film school," he says.

After years of frustration trying to secure backing for his next project, Tom returned to Thailand in 2002, and began producing independent feature films such as *Butterfly Man* and the ever-popular *Ghost of Mae Nak*.

"I saw a niche here, and preferred

to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond. In the West, it is tougher to prevail."

In the 13 years since his return, Tom has made his mark in the producing game, with numerous projects, even including the Tata Young music video *El Niño*.

Though it may be on the sidelines of his 'true vocation', Tom speaks with enthusiasm, and a little frustration, about producing.

"Basically, I help filmmakers execute their vision, so my day job is to facilitate people doing what I dream of doing - to be a filmmaker myself."

There can be a mountain of bureaucracy and official permissions to wade through ("They love their paperwork here"). Sometimes the bureaucrats meddle as well, like pushing for Jason Statham to use OTOP products during the

film. "I can't make Jason Statham drink rambutan juice onscreen, it just doesn't work," Tom laughs.

Tom and his staff - almost all fellow *luk krung* - facilitate communication between the foreign and local talent - both cultural and linguistic. He walks the line between the two worlds - as he always has.

"We understand the situation from both directions... that Westerners want it now, while Thais might be a bit more elastic with deadlines.

"It can get heated. Some clients [particularly from a country that shall remain nameless here] want to start WWII because they believe

they were cheated out of 20 Baht. And if you shout at the speedboat guy because he is 15 minutes late, you end up with no speedboat for the day. The driver's been insulted and won't work for love nor money."

"You know, most foreign film companies come to Thailand thinking it is cheap and their budget will go further, but it doesn't necessarily work out that way. Many things must be brought in from abroad, and there is a lack of expertise in certain areas - say, like armoury and explosions.

"But almost every foreign filmmaker goes home feeling positive about their experience. Thailand is a pleasant place to work. The Thai crews work hard and are eager to please, so in the end, production can go very smoothly and the companies are happy."

So that's the 'day job'. But in the past couple of years, Tom has made a return to his first love of directing after more than a decade's absence, with two Thai films - both of which he also produced.

Mindfulness and Murder (2011), based on the book by Nick Wilgus, is the story of a former policeman turned monk who is compelled to investigate a grisly murder on the temple grounds.

The other, *The Last Executioner* (2014) is based on the life of Chavoret Jaruboon, the last of Thailand's executioners who executed condemned prisoners by machine gun.

Stylistically, both films reflect the slower pace of traditional Thai life compared to the West, though ironically, in film form this meditative pace is usually more admired and enjoyed by Western filmgoers.

The films have a central theme



of a conflicted protagonist (in both, very well-acted by Vithaya Pansringarm) who finds himself having to follow a path he would prefer not to, but does so out of a strong sense of duty.

In *The Last Executioner*, for example, Chavoret gives up his profession - and his passion - as a rock 'n roll musician, taking a job at the infamous Bang Kwang prison when his girlfriend becomes pregnant. Proving himself to be of solid and reliable character, he is eventually promoted to head executioner, a role from which he derives

no pleasure whatsoever, and indeed is traumatised by it. It is a duty, something he must do to earn a living for his family.

Its release sandwiched between a *Transformers* film and *Planet of the Apes*, *The Last Executioner* spent just one week in local cinemas, so took in little money. "But that doesn't really matter that much," Tom shrugs.

It deserved better. But Tom is happy with the result. "I think we stayed true to the spirit of the man. He became more famous as an executioner than he ever did as a rock 'n roller - which was what he had really wanted." It is a rather tragic story; doing what one must do rather than what one wants to do.

However, the film will have its European debut in April at the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy and CinemAsia in Amsterdam, where it seems likely Tom will win some well-deserved recognition as a director rather than as a producer - hopefully averting a career fate similar to the executioner's.

Tom's long-term hopes for the future reflect such a desire - and the duality of his roots. "I'd like to see Thai films on a world stage. Perhaps at the Oscars, or a BAFTA," he says. "If I can be a part of that success, I'd be proud of my contribution. It's been a career-long dream to make a film about Siam in the 17th century, when the Kingdom resisted European colonisation; an East meets West adventure in the grand tradition. I'm hoping that will be the movie to put us firmly on the Hollywood map."

And if he does achieve this goal, perhaps Tom, like the lead characters in classic film form, can finally live happily ever after. ■

THIS PAGE: TOM WALLER ON SET

OPPOSITE PAGE: MOVIE POSTERS FOR *THE LAST EXECUTIONER* AND *MECHANIC: RESURRECTION*