

Filmmaking With Teeth

Falang offers the story behind the smile

By SARAH GIGNAC

“Everyone has story. Me too. I have story. But nobody care about me.”

Meet Pla, a 19-year-old Thai bar-girl and the mesmerizing subject of local filmmaker Jordan Clark's debut documentary, *Falang: Beyond Bangkok's Smile*. Pla has been working in Bangkok's bars since she was 13, and has somehow avoided entering into a sex-for-money relationship with a “Falang” (one not native to Thailand; an alien, a stranger). Considering she works and lives in the heart of Bangkok's sex trade, this is nothing short of miraculous. And sadly, cannot last.

Like many Thai people, Pla is reluctant to share details about her life or work. “Thailand is known as The Land of Smiles,” Clark explains. “People there are incredibly friendly and always have a brilliant smile when they greet you . . . [*Falang*] explores what lies behind that smile. It was amazing to find how many meanings one expression can have.”

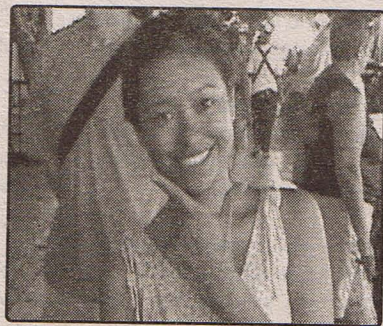
As Pla's story unfolds, we begin to see many emotions behind her vibrant smile: sadness, worry, fear and desperation. She is a woman struggling to survive, while longing to portray the beauty of her life and her country to others.

“I feel that I didn't really find her or her story, as much as . . . she found me and I was the tool in which she told her story with,” Clark continues. “I've tried to stay outside

of the typical prostitution film where we are given a bunch of numbers and several women as subjects. *Falang* gives viewers a look at one girl and the world she lives in expressed through her eyes. It is an intimate portrait.”

This is exactly what attracted the Vic Independent to the film. As programmer Donovan Aikman explains, “*Falang* provides a real aspect of discovery to Thailand's sex trade through Clark's interaction with Pla. *Falang* gives a first-person feel to a large social and economic issue.”

This personal approach to larger social issues is a style that can be seen in several of the festival's films this year. In *Born in Brothels*, the children of



Calcutta's red light district are given cameras and asked to photograph the world around them. *Soraida: A Woman of Palestine* follows one woman through her day-to-day life while living in occupied Ramallah. *Sin Embargo—Nevertheless* gives us a variety of characters from artists to bird lovers who are struggling to survive in the face of the U.S. embargo of Cuba.

Along with *Falang*, these films provide us with a real feeling of what it would be like to live in such oppressing conditions. As Clark comments, “We should take an interest in how global economic [issues] impact human worth and, in the case of *Falang*, one girl's life.” M