

WATER PUPPETS

PERFORMING ON THE RICE PADDY STAGE

The art of water puppetry, *Mua Roi Nuoc*, originated in the northern part of Vietnam, when residents of the Red River Delta created this tradition to tell stories of their lives and their legends.

The air is filled with the lilting sounds from the orchestra of drums, a flute, fiddle, xylophone and stringed instrument. As the hushed crowd looks on, a wooden soldier rides into battle against the enemy, triumphant with a magical sword given to him by a turtle from the lake. He floats in a stage of water, manipulated by human hands, dressed in lacquer and created from solid fig wood. And his story has been told for centuries by rural farmers who build their puppet stages in

ponds, rice paddies and lakes. Not just a platform, the water is also a character that brings premonitions of the conflict of combat or the harmony of faeries and carries boats on victorious journeys.

Characters standing up to 90 centimetres and weighing as much as 15 kilograms are attached to poles and strings and manoeuvred with graceful movements perfected from practice and dedication, through ancient techniques and secrets. Muddy, waist-

deep water and a bamboo screen hides puppeteers who act out hundreds of stories and scenes of comedies and tragedies, as their ancestors have done since the 10th century.

Although times of war and strife have tried to break down this traditional artform, it still exists today in water puppet troupes that tour the world and in farmers who spend their last savings to perform only for the pleasure of recreating old folklore and history.



The puppeteer

In Vietnam it takes more than a degree at the local art college and a love of the art to become a water puppeteer. It takes strength to carry such heavy puppets, stamina to last through long shows, a multitude of skills in singing, dancing, and musical instruments, and the ability to tell ancient stories through inanimate objects.

