

## **DECLINE OF MYANMAR MODERN PLAYS**

Ngwe Wut Hmuon Zan<sup>\*</sup>

### **Introduction**

The period between 1947 and 1954 was the golden age of modern plays, in which plays stood as public favourites. However with the advent of new film technology and talkie movie together with other variety of modern entertainment programmes declined after 1954 and then again after 1989 though some plays were revived again at Waziyar Theatre it did not last long. Within one or two years the play performing art also declined because of the other variety of modern entertainment programmes appeared.

This paper analyzes the causes for the decline of modern plays its present days. The plays reached its peak in the post independence period and it met with a gradual decay after 1995, due to the advent of modern entertainment techniques and infiltration of decadent cultural influence of the west that overwhelmed the typical culture of Myanmar performing arts like, Drama, Anyeint, and Pyazat. The accounts of personal interviews and memoirs of the play artists, who were caught in a vicious circle of play arena, would probably be a clue to draw a true judgment for the decline of modern stage plays in the present days.

### **Decline of Myanmar Modern Plays**

The resurgence of the movies and cinemas in Yangon in the postwar period led to a gradual decline of the play troupes and the play houses, especially of the theatres which staged only plays (Pyazats) only like the Myaing theatre at Kandawgyi Lake Side. The Myaing group was one of the famous play troupes during wartime, which paid highest art fees to its troupe members. The Myaing troupe could not maintain these art fees and allowances as before due to the decrease in number of play audience. The “Yadanar Theik” play which was arranged to stage at the Myaing Teatre was suspended due to the assassination of Bogyoke Aung San and some of his cabinet members on 19 July 1947, and all further performances also had to stop because of the curfew order in Yangon. Later the government auctioned the

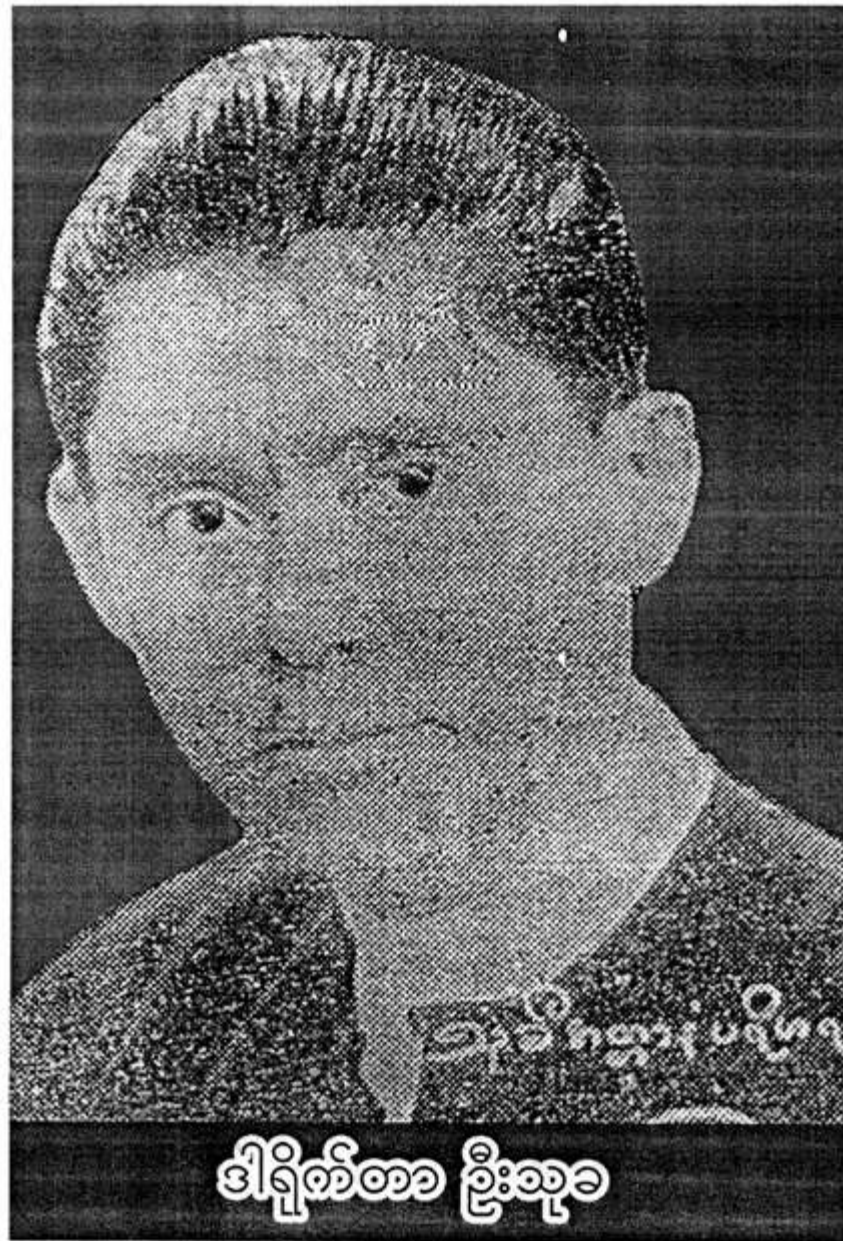
---

<sup>\*</sup> Dr, Associate Professor, Department of History, Kyaukse University

theatre for its defaults on land tax and income tax contracts. Thus ended the play career of the Myaing troupe and the theatre during the golden age of staged play at other theatres. However the plays continued to be performed, at such theatres in downtown Yangon as the Zaw, Zeim, Karhtay, Win Win and Town Hall theatres etc. When the cinematographers resumed their former professions of filming in the post independence period, many play casts, most of them former film stars, played the joint performance of both play and film.

There was a scarcity of popular play casts, who performed play only in this period, and thus it was necessary to choose the new ones, the potentials for future play world. A business-minded manager of the Karhtay Theatre, U Theik Soe, who, being worried about future prospect of the play world, consulted with director U Thukha and Toe Tak Yay U Thein, to hold a contest for selecting play actress in 1950.

At this contest Kyi Kyi Khin scored 12 marks and thus stood first and Khin May Kyin the second with 11 marks. Then both were selected and were renamed, by adding suffix "Htay" to their name, as Kyi Kyi Htay and Myint Myint Htay, in honour of the Karhtay Theatre, where they were selected. However, the newspapers of the following day wrongly reported their photos and names, and thus Kyi Kyi Khin was known as Myint Myint Htay and Khin May Kyin as Kyi Kyi Htay. With these names they became famous actress in both worlds of play and film. The first play performed by Myint Myint Htay was "Wun Nei Ma Lwe Thar Ma Me" (It can't be named a son unless he was conceived in mother's womb). It was directed by Shwe Done B Aung, and the co-stars in this play were Kyaw Aye, Myint Lwin, Nwe Nwe Htay, Tint Lwin, Dolly Htay, Rosy Htay etc. Myint Myint Htay had performed many plays among them the "Ei Wathon Myay" play was the most successful one of the play actress Myint Myint Htay had taken part.



Film and Play Director, U Thukha  
Than Nwe, *The Modern Plays*, P-208

This play was an extraordinary one and its display of such scenes as Arahāt's traveling by Jhāna and the destruction of Ari images into pieces,

were greatly attractive to the audience so much, that its performance had to continue for the next three months.

The Queen of the Plays, Kyi Kyi Htay started her career of performing plays and dramas at the age of six. Her primary trainer was Saya Kha. Her first play was “Au main ma” (oh woman!) of director U Thu Kha, in which she casted as a crooked woman who swindled the diamonds. She performed in many plays of the Win Win theatre, directed by Dagon Saya Tin and Bogalay Tint Aung. Her acting in these plays were so outstanding and through that, she became a famous play actress in a sudden burst of speed in 1951. She scored the title of play Queen. Whilst performing in the plays, she took part in the film named “Chit Thet Wai”, together with the actor A-I U Tin Maung and she won the Academy award in this film. “Chit Thet Wai” the one and the only one. After her performance in the play “Myaypadethar”, at Win Win theatre, she transferred outright to the film world entirely, She also made recording of many songs with Columbia Gramophone Recording Company.

One of the plays of Dagon Saya Tin that lost public favor as well as (profit) admission fee was the play named “Tharsoe Mikhin” (Mother of a bad son), staged at Win Win theatre. It was a play of tragedy without actress, who was the main cast of play, and thus public hardly accepted this type of play. The director attempted to meet its target of ten days’ performance by presenting tickets for free admission.

Dagon Saya Tin therefore presented another play of comedy named “Gontu Gonpyaing” (jousting for glory) as a compensation for the loss of his former play “Tharsoe Mikhin”. The story of “Gontu Gonpyaine” play was simple but comic, and presented with full sense of humour. It was a wedding of the daughter of village headman and a son of a rural rich man.

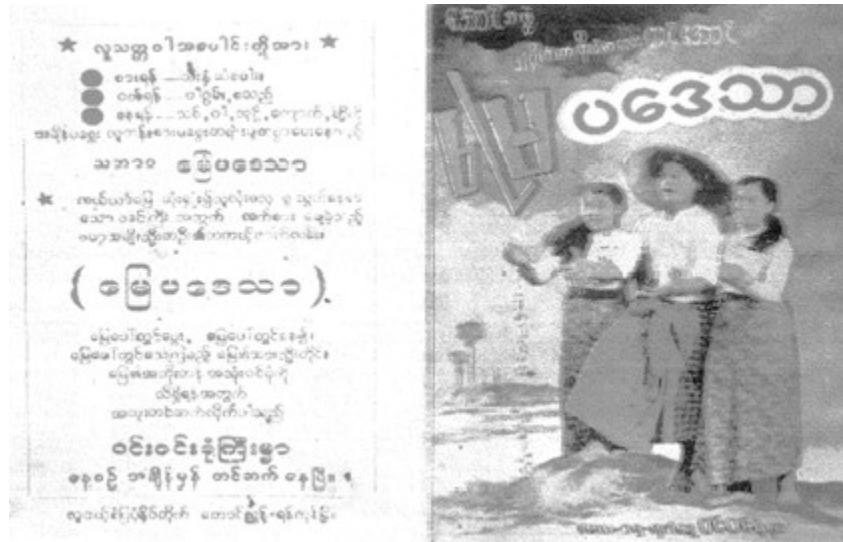
Their marriage was abstracted by the jousting tournament of the parents and their notable jousts with each other became the humour of the situation. The public accepted this type of comedy and thus it gained a favourable income.

One of the famous plays of Dagon Saya Tin was “Nge Kywan Swe”(An old flame), the story of his own creation. The original name was “Nge Kywan Khin”, but when Saya Tin heard the song, named “Nge Kywan

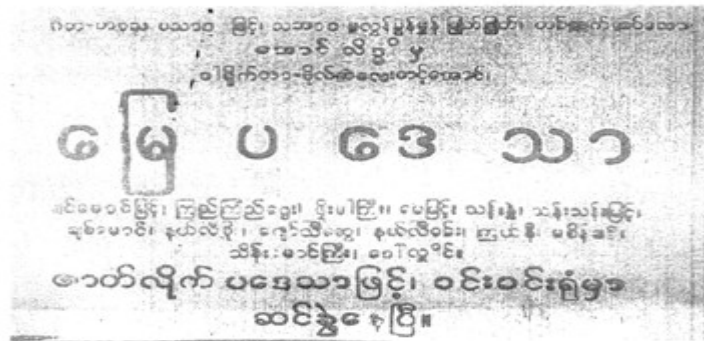
Khin” composed by Yan Naing Swe and sung by Shwe Myaing Kyi, he got an idea to change the name of his play.



Play Director Dagon Sayar Tin  
The Nwe, *The Modern Plays*, P-29



A Pamphlet of, Myay Padethar Pyazat by Director Bo Galay Tint Aung  
(By Courtesy of Bo Galay Tint Aung)



An advertisement of, Myay Pedathar Pyazat in The Light of Myanmar  
Daily. 23<sup>rd</sup>, May 1953



The main casts were Pho Par Gyi, Khin Mg Myint, May Chit, Tin Tin Mu, Pho Par Lay, Ko Aye Myint (Pyidaungsu Kyaw Naing), U Kyaw Thaung, Daw Hlaing, Daw Thein Kywe, and Jolly Swe. The stage artist was U Hla Mg Gyi and Carpenter U Charlie, and the conductor was pianist Shwe Pyi Aye.

The “Nge Kywan Swe” play portrayed indirectly the living conditions of Yangon in the post-war periods, in which the newly emerged licensed hotels were seducing /women of good lineage into prostitution, and thus it gave them social lessons, that they should not enjoy a foolhardy adventure in love affairs. The director with his talents in play-art, displayed the finale of play in alternative with double purpose of getting public favour as well as materializing his original plot.

In those days Academy award for excellent plays was presented not by the government but by the play-critics, a columnist of the Newspaper, Thamadi Shinlone (a) U Nyi Nyi, a play-critic of Thamardi Newspaper, awarded this “Nge Kywan Swe” play a gold medal Academy, and he also chose the best actor and actress of the time, by making critiques on their actings. Myo Chit was selected as King of play and May Chit as Queen of the play. Kyi Kyi Htay also was selected as Queen in the next year.

The “Myepadethar” play portrayed the hardships and miserable lives of peasants under the oppressions of land owners and money lenders who were the pivots of the British imperialists. And the play pointed out the fact that ownership of land was the life-blood of the peasant class.

Another constructive play named “Shwe Phyt Ngwe Phyt” (A short cut business justified the wealthier life) was staged at Win Win Theatre and was directed by Dagon Saya Tin.

Dagon Saya Tin introduced a new programme for B.B.S (Burma Broadcasting Service), i.e. the broadcasting of the theme songs of the staged plays, sang by the casts themselves at the B.B.S studio. It was a dual purposes of Saya Tin who arranged it as an advertisement for the new plays as well as introducing a new programme for B.B.S. The new play usually changed fortnightly on every Friday, and thus the actors and actress had to go the B.B.S for broadcasting of the new songs at 8 a.m on Saturday Morning.

The year 1953 was a year of renaissance for films and cinemas, as the cinematography had advanced in its art and technology as well as in number of production. With the growing popularity of films the play troupes gradually declined in 1953, as the directors, casts and technicians of the play arena had to change their professions from play to film.

The most popular play with the box office income during the waning period of play was “Yin Hnit Thee Char” (An offspring) directed by comedian Kywuntaw Chit Mg, and was staged at Win Win Theatre on 19 June 1953. The preliminary press- show was presented and invited all play critics from newspapers and journals and let them criticize the play. The Writers’ Association presented a play at the annual Royal Poet Day, The Myawaddymingyi U Sa” play in 1951 and “Mg Pe Nge” play in 1952 respectively. The “Mg Pe Nge” play was staged at the Win Win Theatre and was directed by Saya U Thu Kha. In this play Ma Hla Than was casted as “Dai Khin Khin, Daw Khin Su as Su Phayalat, Thinkhar as King Thibaw and Bo Ba Ko as the Crown Prince and director U Thu Kha himself casted as Mg Pe Nge, The lord of Taung Thaman

In 1953 the writer’s Association presented another play of historical episode named “Hlaing Hteit Khaung Tin”, in which Shwe Nyar Mg and May Thit casted as main characters of Prince Kanaung and Princess Hlaing Hteit Khaung Tin respectively. The role of Hlaing Hteit Khaung Tin was ended with a tragic scene with the assassination of Prince Kanaung. This play was not popular with the audience and thus it lasted for only one week.

In 1954 Royal Poet day, the writers’ association presented the “U Pon Nya” play. The plot was written by Nan Nyunt Swe and Saya Thinkhar was casted as U Pon Nya. U Pon Nya was a famous poet and playwright and was well known in the writings of epistles during the reign of king Mindon. Many Princes approached him to study the writing of epistles, and king Mindon himself praised his writings. Prince Myin Kun and Myin Khuan Taing forced him to give them propitious time for their plot against of king Mindon. U Pon Nya being afraid of the nearest sword, and thus agreed to mastermind the plot. However King Mindon narrowly escaped from an assault but instead Prince Kanaung was slain on the spot. U Pon Nya was kept in custody at the Mayor U Tha Oo’s house, but later he was executed on charge of high treason. The

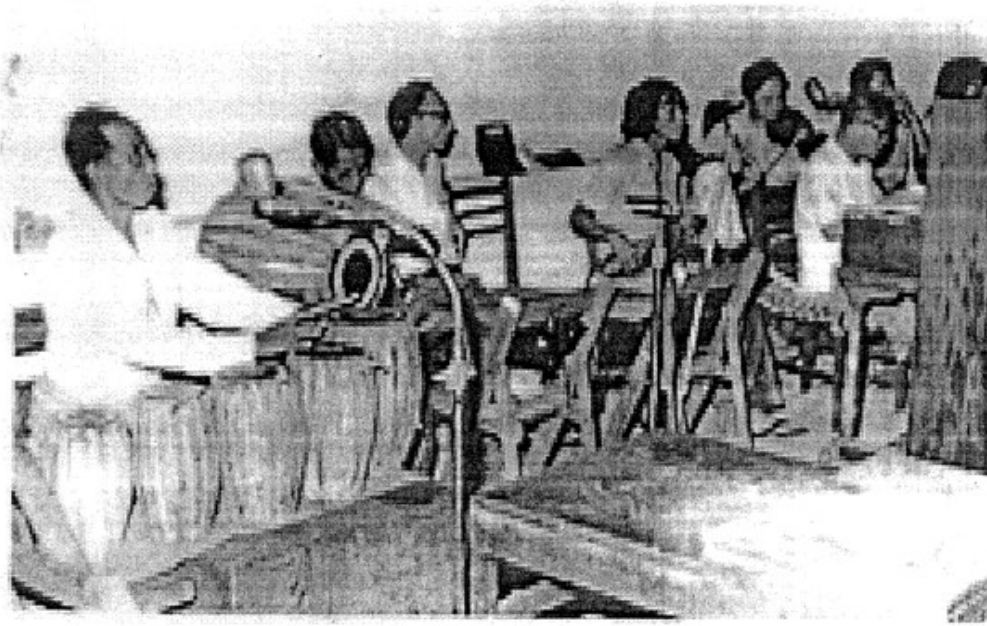


play concluded with a tragic scene of a weeping Khin Hmon, a favourite puple of U Pon Nya.

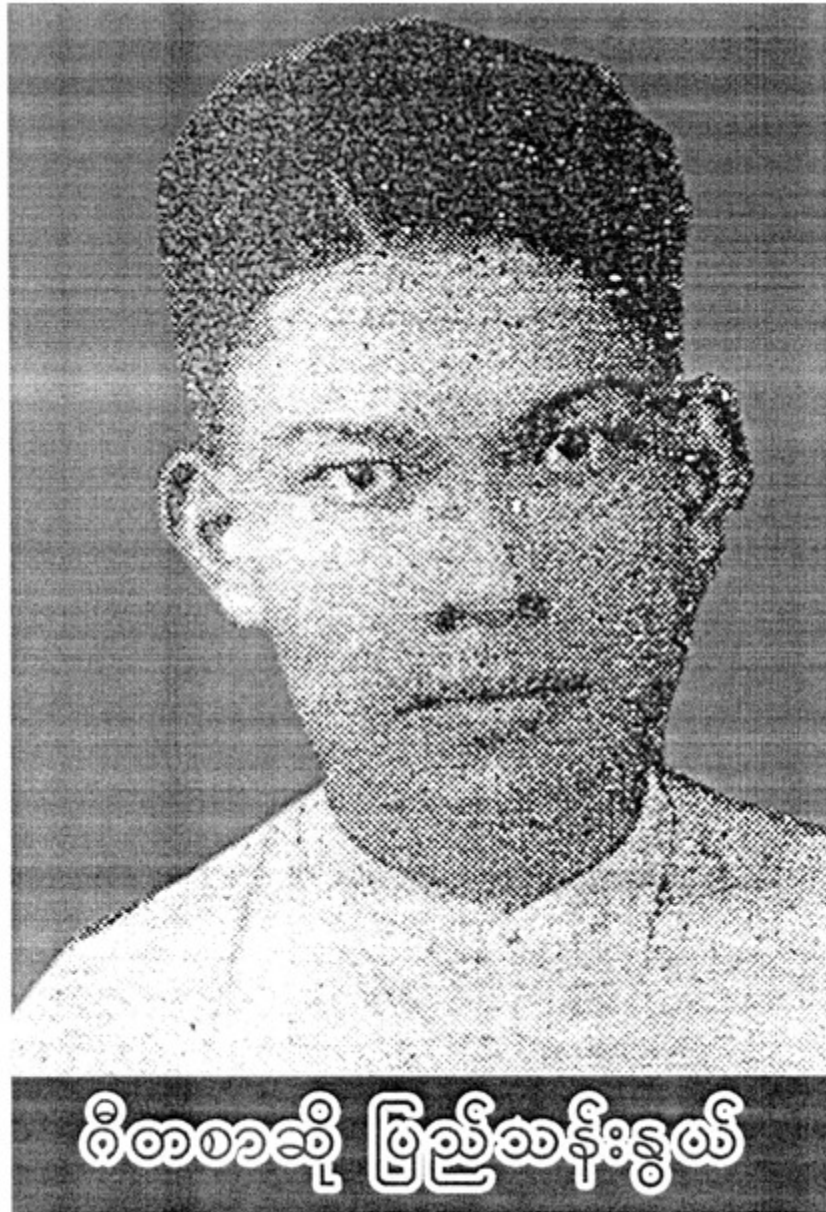
Another play “Let Weithondra” was prepared for performance on the 1955 Royal Poet Day. Both plays “U Pon Nya and Lakwai Thondra” were not so much popular, with the public that writers Association decided not to perform on stage for seven days, but to perform in such celebrations as giving public lecture on literature and paying homage to aged old writers alike.



Film and Play Actor, Takkatho Myo Chit  
Than Nwe, *The Modern Plays*, P-142



Musician, Gi Ta Lu Lin Doctor Mg Ko Ko (By Courtesy of Bo Galay Tint Aung)



Film and Play Play Song Composer, Pyay Than Nwe  
Than Nwe, *The Modern Plays*, P-19

The staging of plays fortnightly at the Win Win Theatre continued regularly up to 1956. One of the favourites of public till 1954 was the play named “Naung Chit Peitin” (An echo of the old flame) in which Myo Chit, Myint Myint Htay and Pho Par Gyi were the main casts.

This play was a drama type emphasizing the love and affection of the lovers who possessed the qualities of mutual understanding, sincerity and faithfulness in their relations as husband and wife. The play was very popular with the public so much and it lasted for four weeks.

Bogalay Tint Aung was a favourite pupil of Dagon Saya Tin, who trained him to become a co-director of his plays His younger brother Gita Lulin Mg Ko Ko was a musician of the music troupes. The “Apyone Laksaung” play made him a full-fledged director and ever since Bogalay Tint Aung presented over forty plays throughout the age of play.

The conductor Gita Lulin Mg Ko Ko joined the world of music and play at the age of thirteen, and he started composing theme songs in the plays, “Thanyawzin” and “Sispyan” He had written over 1000, stories of staged play and film, and composed over ten thousand 10000 songs. He also directed such plays as “Chit Kabar Si Tho”, “Gi Ta Lone May,” “Thu Ka Tot May Par Pyi” etc.

Similarly Comedian Than Nwe and Chit Mg presented the staged plays at Win Win and Karthtay theatres. Than Nwe’s play were “Hnit San Chit Pan”, “Muann Chit Thanthaya”, “Chit tar Par bei”, “Gon Pan ta Pwint”, “Myitta Tay Than”, “Khwar Nyo Thinbi May”, “Chit Kyay Muon”, “Myat Man Taw Nhyo Par Nei,” “Chit Khwint Ma Paine”, “Ta Wei Lei Lei”, “Ko Thway Ko Thar”, “Meinma Soda”, Mi Thar Pha Thar, “Ah Pyaw Sone Nay”, etc... Chit Mg plays were “Yway Kauk Pwe,” “Hnit Sint Myitta”, “Htoo Myat Chein Khar”, “Shwe Pyit Sone”, Lawka Yeitthar”, “Ahlin Nei Ahmaung”, “Yin Hnit Thee Char,” “Hnit Ko Ta Chit”, “Chit Ya Khet Tei, “Chit Thone Lee”, “Chit Tat Par Say”, “Chit Ya Nant Ma Pye” “Mingalar Pheit Sar”, Yamuonna”.

The music Bands played an important role in performance of plays. A music band consisted of piano, violin, jess band, Double Bass, and wind instruments. The popular conductors were. A. 1 Khin Mg, Pianist Hla Shwe (Sagaing), Shwe Pyi Aye and Gita Lulin Mg Ko Ko. The musicians wore uniforms that their troupe and plays a preliminary overture music and song. In

these overtures the name of director, actors, actress and even the plot of the play were referred and mentioned. As soon as the performance started, each cast introduced himself or herself by singing the songs. The actor, actress and even the comedians had to sing solo (or) duet song about the plot. Most of the theme songs were composed by Yan Naing Sein, Bogalay Tint Aung, Mg Ko Ko and Pyi Than Nwe. There were suitable pair of comedians in the plays in the plays as well as in the films. For example, “Hteik Peik and Hmat Kyi”, “Sai Ta Mot and Ywei Kyi”, “Sampa and Panchar” and “Kyai Ni and Ma Sein Khin” etc. Daw Sein Khin was a rare woman comedian of the Win Win playhouse, and stood as a perfect complement to comedian Kyai Ni. She retained her popularity as a comedian in the film world till her death.

Even though Daw Thein Kywe, who casted the character of a virago in the plays, was known with nick name as Meinmalei Thein Kyawe (Thein Kywe, the slicker) and Sein Nakat Thein Kywe (Thein Kywe, with diamond ear-rings), she was really a woman of good temper in the outside world, similarly the another female virago Daw Thein Yin, was renowned as Meinmashwin Thein Yin, (Thein Yin, the prostitute), due to her talented action in the play. Like the villains in the plays Aye Ngwe Gyi and Nyo Aye Gyi are the pious Buddhists in their daily life.

During the good income days of the play artists gambling and all sort of pleasures mushroomed around the play houses, like Poker, Mahjongg, and kat (domino-like blocks) and even a betting on horse race on every Saturday. The villain Mg Mg, the hunch-back (Khar kone Mg Mg), Academy U Thein Mg and the violinist Ko Di Poe were notorious for their interest in gambling and thus known with the nick name as (“gambler, the great (or) gambling specialists”).

The advent of film technology and popularity of the new talkie films such as cinema -scope, techni colour, 3Dis, 3 dimension films led to a gradual declined of play entertainment after 1953. Most of the actors, actresses, and even directors, script writers and technicians of the play troupes changed their professions from play to film after 1954, and thus play troupes at Win Win play house declined and dispersed. There were no new investments as well as incentives for the improvement of both the standards of the plays and its artists, such as, training of new play stars, advanced technology for stage-settings, and finding out perfect plots or stories by purchasing novels of the

popular writers etc. The owners of the play troupes had no interest in reinvestment of their profits for improvement, but instead enjoyed the benefits dividing among themselves'. Beside the development of other entertainment sectors like gramophone and the talkie films caused a rapid decline of the staged plays.

The last play of Win Win Theatre was “Chit Lun Lo” (In excess of love) staged in 1955, as a farewell to the play house by its members. After its performance, the administrative boards of Win Win playhouse decided to close it forever, and thus faded out the play age altogether in 1955. Since then the plays lost its pride of place in Myanmar performing arts, but it managed to linger on a partial programme in Nyint Oo Yan entertainments of the drama troupes and in the musical variety shows on the commemorative Days of the state such as Union Day, Peasants’ and workers’ Day and Independence Day celebrations.

However, Prime Minister U Nu in 1957, patronized the performance of play, named “Myat Mon Yadana” (a noble treasure), with the intention of upbringing the moral character of the youths of the country. It was staged at Myo Ma School, in honouring the National Day ceremony. The director was Bogalay Tint Aung and conductor was Gita Lulin Mg Ko Ko. The top film stars like, Kyi Kyi Htay, Myint Myint Htay, Khin Ohn Myint, San Shar Tin, May Nwe, Myo Chit, Ze Ya etc., took part in this play, which was sponsored by the Prime Minister himself.

Play performance is much more difficult than acting in film casts must have good looks and good body figures in addition to their vocal training and good dialogue because play is a live show where as film is only motion pictures (movies) So it is easy for play actors to acting film but film actors take sometime to become good play actors.

In 1989, Bogalay Tint Aung and Mg Ko Ko took the lead to resume performance of plays by renovating the old cinema, Waziya in Pansodan quarter. They reorganized the old comrades of the play world and then restaged such play of Dagon Saya Tin as “Gon Tu Gon Pyaing”, “Yaukkhama Yothey Atheshey” “Amay Chywayma Hla Hla Lay”, “Kyaw San Kay Hnit Yupamalar”.

These plays were performed outright as many as eighty or hundred shows altogether. And other plays like “Nge Kywan Swe”, ‘Chit Thaw Shwe

War”, “Thu Ko Hma Chit Te,” “Ahla Sone Ahchein”, were also staged at National Theatre.

However these performances could not retain characteristic of play against the newly emerged modern entertainment programmes like, video, VCD, DVD, Karaoke and Stereo Live shows of the modern music and thus totally faded out the play performances ever since then.

In summary the performance of plays began with the rise of play house like, Myaing, Zaw, Zeim, Karhtay and Win Win theatres in the post war period in Yangon. Most of the plays were for entertainment only, but some were the plays with constructive ideas for instructing the moral lessons, inspiring national spirit and patriotism and honoring the sacrifices of the Tatmadaw men. The period between 1947 and 1954, was the golden age of modern plays, in which plays stood as public favourites as an unparalleled entertainment programme.

However with the advent of new film technology and gramophone caused the modern play entertainment to fade out and declined. In 1989, there revived some modern plays but it totally dwindled because of the scientific development together with the film and other modern entertainment programmes of Video, VCD, DVD, Karaoke and the stereo live shows of modern music and today mobile and smart Phone.

## **Conclusion**

The plays became diminished with the rise of talkie films and the performance of plays gradually declined after 1965, when the one and only one playhouse, Win Win had to cease from staging of plays in 1956, Some popular play artists, who indulged in pleasures and gambling during their hey-day, had now conclude their living with poverty at the sunset of their lives.

After 1988, the famous artist brothers, Bokgalay Tint Aung and Gita Lu Lin Dr.Mg Ko Ko had attempted to meet renaissance of a play age, but their efforts were in vain as the other sector of entertainments most are modernized liveshows, Karaok, Videos, V.C.D and T. V etc had already overwhelmed the typical live-shows of modern plays.



There is scarcity of literary records, that is personal documents or diaries compiled by the artists of the play would as they were not accustomed to take account of their activities in written records. Thus sources had to be gathered only on the memoirs of a few famous artists of play world, who explained their experiences and performances.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Tint Aung, Bogalay, *၂၂ယေဖ်;ဝုဖျဂ်* (A maze of flower), Yangon, Sapei Biman Press, 1996.
- Tin, Say, Dagon *၂၂၀လံသိကိတကပုကွာဝ်*  
*ပိဖျိဖျိဇမ္ဗုဒကု* (From Lu-Bioscope to the staged play), The play and play literature, Yangon, Sarpay Biman Press, 1971.
- ၂၂၂ရေဖျာမဂ်, ဖပုကွာဝ်; ဧပုဖုဒကု* (Elcyclopedia of Birmanica) Vol X, Yangon, Sarpay Biman Press, 1966.

### Newspapers

- ၂၂ဝလံသိကိတကပုကွာဝ်* (The Sun), Daily. 23<sup>rd</sup>, May, 1953

### Magazines

- Pyay Than Nwe  
*၂၂၂ရေပုဖုဒကု (30) ခုမုဖျိဇမ္ဗုဒကု; ဝုဒကု; ခုမုဖျိဇမ္ဗုဒကု* (Selection of play actress in 30 years ago), Ngwe Tar Yi Magazine, Yangon, May, 1984.

### Secondary Sources

- Dagonpa Ba Tin, U, *၂၂ဝုဒကုဖျိဇမ္ဗုဒကု* (Myanmar film world and I), Yangon, Botahtaung Press, 1966.
- Lwin Mar Soe *၂၂၂ရေဖျာမဂ်ပိဖျိဖျိဇမ္ဗုဒကု* (1942-1958), (History of Myanmar Staged play (1942-1958), MA. Dissertation, Yangon University, 1995)

## Personal Interview

Name	Designation	Date
Bogalay Tint Aung	The play and film director	23 <sup>rd</sup> , October, 2007.
Nan Nyunt Swe	Writer	21 <sup>st</sup> , March, 2007.

Yuwady Kyi Oo

Writer

21<sup>st</sup>, March, 2007

Jolly Swe

Play and film comedian

2<sup>nd</sup>, February, 2008