

ARTS

Edited by Kevin Kwong
kevin.kwong@scmp.com



Michael Coyne is a man in a hurry: the photographer has embarked on a project to capture the life and customs in villages around the world before globalisation sweeps them all away.

Citing figures from a recent UN report, Coyne says more than half of the world's population live in cities and he wants to document village life before it is gone. Some of his photographic records are displayed in *Hearing the Grass Grow - Village Life*, which opens at the Fringe Club this week as part of its City Festival.

"I've been working on it for a long time because I realised villages were starting to disappear," Coyne says of the project that he initiated three years ago.

"Villages are changing - everything is becoming a monoculture. And so they're losing a lot of their old customs, a lot of their old ideas. The kids want to become modern. As soon as electricity comes on they want phones, they want MTV."

One of the consequences of these changes, including the flight of the younger generation to cities, is that now Coyne encounters many villages where there are only young children and the grandparents looking after them.

His black-and-white images capture the calm and sometimes forlorn ordinariness of village life. "[This project is] about listening to what's going on in the villages... It's so quiet, it's just really wonderful and you have to lie there and listen to what's going on - the stillness of it."

The 63-year-old regards himself as a documentary photographer, having made a career as an observer of both the tragic and mundane facets of human existence. His



A bride waits with her family (above) to be allowed into her new husband's home in Mahuadanj, India; coal miners in Bihar (top). Photos: Michael Coyne

Bearing witness

Michael Coyne is focusing his camera on village life after years of documenting conflict around the world. **Kristina Perez** learns why

energy is tangible in a body of work that spans several decades, the continents and pivotal events in recent history, including the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Rwandan genocide.

It has not always been just about getting the right image. Coyne recalls that he was once allowed to document the trial of a drug dealer who was found guilty of murdering his business partner in Tehran.

"When they offered to hang the man at the murder trial for me, the judge said, 'Look, he's guilty, we're going to hang him. What time would the light be right for the picture?'"

"[The judge] was trying to be obliging. The man was a criminal. There was no question about it. There was no question he had committed a murder and a violent murder. But that doesn't give me the right to make the decision about how long he lives. Because if I had said, well, the light is fabulous in the morning, let's hang him in the morning, that means I've taken a day away from that man's life."

Coyne recently completed a doctorate at Griffith University in Australia based on his life's work and focusing on the ethical dilemmas of what he does as a documentary photographer.

"You are looking for some kind of truth. But truth only as you can see it, only as you can present it. And that's all you can do," says Coyne.

"I'm a visual anthropologist: I seek out whatever the subject is and try to see it as openly as I can. I try to do these projects openly. You always carry baggage from whatever you are - you can't help that - but I try to go to these things as openly as I can to let them tell me."



Photo: Anne O'Sullivan

Coyne started working as a photographer at a newspaper in Australia, then at magazines, and eventually had his own studio where he was shooting cookbooks. After one particularly frustrating week trying to photograph the perfect ice cream cone, a friend invited him to give a photo workshop in the Philippines. It turned out to be for some people fighting against the Marcos regime.

"I met a young man who invited me to come back to his part of the

When you see people in absolute poverty or struggling under bombs or whatever ... It still affects me just as much. And I go home and I carry it with me

Michael Coyne (left)

country, which was in Mindanao. He happened to be one of the most wanted men in the Philippines because he was a member of the MNLF [Moro National Liberation Front]," says Coyne.

"I stayed with the MNLF and became very friendly; went back and forth many times, documented their struggles and through them became involved with the Islamic world worldwide."

He has since worked for a long list of publications as well as produced several books, picking up awards along the way, but he is

perhaps best known for his eye-opening documentation of the early days of the Iranian revolution. The message of Coyne's work is always to find the humanity.

Coyne is grateful for his wife's support, especially during the eight years he spent going in and out of Iran. "If it wasn't for my wife I couldn't do my kind of work. She encourages me to go and shoot the kinds of subjects that I cover and she supports me 100 per cent."

"Even if I am going somewhere that is dangerous, she knows that I would only be doing it if I thought it was necessary."

But making a career of witnessing the brutality of life does take a toll. "It's terrible to see people in these circumstances," says Coyne. "When you see people in absolute poverty or struggling under bombs or whatever... It's still there. I'm not that cynical yet. It still affects me just as much. And I go home and I carry it with me."

Hearing the Grass Grow - Village Life, from Jan 8 to 24. Free admission. Michael Coyne will give a talk, On Becoming a Working Photographer, Saturday, 6.30pm at the Roof Garden, Fringe Club, HK\$180. Inquiries: 2521 7251

Reviews

Caligula
Hong Kong Repertory Theatre
HK City Hall Theatre
Reviewed: Jan 3

Director Anthony Chan Kam-kuen offers a melancholic reading of this nihilistic piece by Albert Camus based on Caligula, the Roman emperor known for his cruelty.

The French novelist/playwright's work purports that underneath the dictator's seemingly insane and absurd behaviour lies logic and rationality. The irony means the piece can be performed as a tragic-comedy but this two-act adaptation by the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre takes a sober approach.

After his sister/lover Drusilla dies, Caligula (Yau Ting-fai) is a changed man, realising the absurdity of human existence. Since life ceases to have any meaning for him, he decides to make it equally meaningless for everyone else by randomly killing people, passing ludicrous decrees and "making possible the impossible".

Caligula is said to be a vehicle for young actors because the role offers psychological scope and depth. Yau responds to the challenge with limited success. Caligula's transformation from a broken man into a murderer is well handled but Yau lacks presence and charisma.

Ko Hon-man stands out as the patrician Cherea, who tries to understand Caligula before plotting his murder. Ling Man-lung plays a convincing Scipio, the poet in love with Caligula, while Rosa Maria Velasco's Caesonia, Caligula's wife, appears confused as she struggles between her conscience and love for the tyrant.

Kevin Kwong

Runs until Jan 19. In Cantonese with Chinese and English surtitles. HK\$120-HK\$240 Urbtix. Inquiries: 3103 5900



Scipio (Ling Man-lung, front) with Caligula (Yau Ting-fai)

Madama Butterfly
Musica Viva
HK City Hall Concert Hall
Reviewed: Jan 2

Last weekend's production of Puccini's tragic tale of betrayal and self-sacrifice is a reprise of the 2002 version staged by Lo King-man (now Musica Viva's director general) for the Opera Society of Hong Kong. It has been adapted to a smaller stage at City Hall with a new set by Ricky Chan, but keeps Mandy Tam Kay-ye's charming costumes.

The reduced scale suits this intimate work, which focuses on a psychological portrait of its heroine. This is, overall, a solid production.

Nancy Yuen's celebrated portrayal of the title role lived up to its reputation: she is equally believable as the innocent in love at the beginning and the devastated woman who faces death with dignity at the end.

As Pinkerton, Michael Wade Lee has a bold, ringing voice but his singing lacks colour and variety while his acting failed to convince. Yun Deng was moving as Butterfly's loyal maid Suzuki and Brian Montgomery was a well-sung Sharpless.

Natasha Rogai

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