Children's performance challenges stereotypes and prejudices against infected persons

They smile, laugh and play like other children, and if not informed, it would be impossible to know that some of the performers have lived with HIV since they were born.

"All children are treasures. They are all meaningful, capable and can take a lead role in contributing and creating a beautiful world," said composer and director Bruce Gaston, aged 62 and a US citizen.

Mr Gaston became the first and only foreigner to be honoured with Thailand's Silpathorn Award in 2009. The accolade was conferred by Thailand's Ministry of Culture for his contribution in blending Western tunes with Thai classical music. He is currently working on an opera which will feature performances by children.

Mr Gaston's opera has been three years in preparation. Both HIV-infected and non-HIV-infected children will perform in this unique Thai opera for child performers.

The aim of the opera is to create a better understanding of HIV and of ways to overcome the prejudice and stigmatisation experienced by the majority of people who live with the condition.

"People should see that children living with HIV are the same as those who are not infected," said Karl Morsbach, who established Baan Gerda, a home for orphans living with or affected by HIV in Lopburi province.

"Living with HIV brings many disadvantages to the health of these children. Besides that, there is the stigmatisation. Children from outside who do not know better may tease them and these children need to overcome their prejudices. Everybody, regardless of their HIV sero-status, can contribute to society," he said.

Selected to perform in the opera production were 30 children from the Baan Gerda home, the Bangkok Mercy Centre for street children, the Children's Rights Foundation, and international schools in Bangkok.

The performance is inspired by Yann Martel's Booker Award-winning novel Life of Pi, with the threat of a tiger in Martel's book producing an allegory to the challenges of those living with HIV.

Cast member Jenwit Narukatpichai, a student at Regent's International School, said "All people are human, but some are just not so lucky. Having the children living with HIV and those who are not infected working together made me see that there are the lucky ones and the not-so-lucky ones, and it made me empathise more for those that are living with HIV."

Amporn Molloy said she was happy to see her daughters play with children who were living with HIV.

"I'm happy to see that the children living with HIV are happy. They have never made me feel that they are different in any way. They are equally as healthy and happy when they play together," she said.

The show has been performed in various locations, such as the German Embassy in Bangkok, the Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre, and the International Choir Festival of Pattaya.

The upcoming version has been expanded to take place on a grand stage, with backing from a philharmonic orchestra, and it will see its world premiere in April 2010.

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