

## Manola's Lemon Tree (Laos)

*Manola's Lemon Tree* is based on the Lao version of the *kinnari jataka*, *Manola* and *Sithon*, in which the Kinnari princesses bathe in a forbidden lake and one of them—Manola—is caught by a hunter. He takes her to a king to be sacrificed but she is rescued by Prince Sithon. He wants to marry her but his parents object, and while he is fighting the avenging king, Manola escapes. He goes in search of her and after seven years he finds and marries her. The **KETEP** script addresses the devastation of the Kinnari forest homeland not by the highland tribes' slash-and-burn farming, but the clear-cutting by lumber companies, rubber and coffee plantations, and wildlife poaching. The **KETEP** includes tribal characters expressing their frustration at the injustice. In the original Lao story, Sithon has a magic lemon that helps overcome obstacles and so Manola plants a lemon tree as a symbol of their determination.

### Characters:

Manola, *the youngest kinnari princess*

Kalea, *eldest kinnari princess*

Lani, *second kinnari princess*

Dara, *third kinnari princess*

Thep, *a Buddhist hermit*

Bun, *a hunter*

King of Pengchan, *Sithon's father*

Queen of Pengchan, *Sithon's mother*

Phra Sithon, *Prince of Pengchan*

Minister

Priest

King Sucandrima, *king of neighboring kingdom*

Feuchy, *Lao Soung farmer*

Houa, *Lao Soung woman farmer*

Xieng Mieng, *Headman (trickster)*

### Scene One

*Spot light on a kinnari dancer stands still as a statue, then slowly begins to dance.*

MANOLA

Like all good stories, mine begins long ago and far away—in a place that was once real—and now belongs only to the imagination, when all mountain forests threaten to become a distant dream. *(the Kinnari come out dancing, and flying).*

We were daughters of the Kinnari King, our home was the Himabanta forest, a green palace between the river and the clouds. Our parents let us fly freely everywhere in the world, except to Lake Bokkharani. But one moonlit night, we flew above its silvery waters and felt the powerful tug of the forbidden.

KALEA

I can't resist any longer. Let's go down.

LANI

Just to bathe for a little while.

KALEA

Remember, not a word to father.

DARA

So beautiful. So inviting. *(they take off wings and swim)*

MANOLA

Why should such lovely water be forbidden?

LANI

It's like liquid silk.

MANOLA

Race you over to the other side.

THEP

*(Monk and Hunter secretly watch the Kinnari)* See, there they are! Just as beautiful as I told you.

BUN

More than I imagined. But...perhaps you've just conjured a vision to deceive me.

THEP

My powers aren't so great.

BUN

I'm going to catch one.

THEP

I promised you only a look. The Kinnari are too delicate for you. They'd melt in your hands.

BUN

*(puts his hands around the hermit's throat)* But you won't! Quickly, tell me how.

THEP

Didn't you tell me you once saved the Naga King's life and he gave you his magic noose?

BUN

Ah, yes.

THEP

Hide the wings of the one you want and when she can't fly, bind her with it.

BUN

I will. Now don't you go scaring them. *(he laughs, and hides Manola's wings)*

KALEA

*(getting out)* Hurry, Manola. We have to go.

MANOLA

Coming. I was diving to see how deep the moon's reflection was. *(gets out)* All right! Very funny! Who hid my wings?

DARA

What?

MANOLA

I hung them here on this branch. *(the sisters stare at the empty branch)*

LANI

They must have blown away.

DARA

Everyone, quickly look around.

KALEA

It's almost daylight. We have go.

MANOLA

I can't! *(Bun steps forward and swings noose. The birds scream and take off. Manola runs after them. The noose catches her.)* Stop! Come back! Save me!

DARA

We can't leave her.

LANI

What can we do?

KALEA

We'll attack together. Lani, you go for one eye, I'll go for the other. Dara, peck his hand holding the noose. Dive! *(Bun shoots and misses. Only Kalea dives and strikes his eye. He writhes on the ground. Kalea is unable to free Manola.)* The noose is magic, Manola. I can't untie it. We have to go get help. *(they fly off)*

BUN

*(he clutches his eye)* You'll pay for this.

THEP

*(he rushes in)* You caught one!

BUN

Use your herbs. Save my eye.

THEP

*(he makes a patch for Bun's eye)* I don't know if this will save your sight, but it'll take away the pain.

BUN

It doesn't matter. I'm a rich man now.

THEP

Indeed! Few men are lucky to have a Kinnari wife!

BUN

Wife! King Sucandrima is preparing a grand sacrifice of all living things. He's offered a large reward to the hunter that brings a live Kinnari. Goodbye, old fool. (*He puts Manola's wings in a bag, and throws her over his shoulder.*)

**Black out.**

## Scene Two

*Sucandrima's palace, the priests prepare the sacrifice of animals*

SUCANDRIMA

Welcome all, esteemed princes, to the greatest sacrifice in the world—one of every kind of animal. Look at them, lined up as far as the eye can see! They docilely wait to be sacrificed to god and eaten by men—such is their fate. (*gazes out at audience*) Ah, Prince Sithon, friend and neighbor. We're especially honored by your presence. Is it not a magnificent sight?

SITHON

The gathering is...impressive. Many strange creatures I've never seen before, (*surprised*) but there's a woman among them!

SUCANDRIMA

It's a Kinnari. She'll be killed last.

SITHON

But where are her wings?

SUCANDRIMA

You're right. Her glory is only in her wings. I should display them. (*as the wings are brought out, a rat runs by Manola. She screams. Sithon puts his finger to his lips*)

SUCANDRIMA

Now let the ceremony begin.

PRIEST

Let the King of the Mountains, Queen of the Waters,  
Dewi Seri goddess of rice,  
be moved by our prayers  
and accept our great sacrifice  
of the millions that die  
all for the good of mankind.

We submit the willing flesh and feeble minds,  
of the diverse kingdom over which we reign,  
with this magnificent rite  
offered with humility  
all for the good of mankind.

*(Sithon sets off fire cracker. A sudden uproar as the animals howl and shriek; a black cloud of crows rises from the trees and rats scurry through the crowd, scattering people and creatures in all directions. Amid the turmoil, Sithon grabs Manola in one hand and her wings in the other.)*

BUN

*(in the quiet aftermath, he staggers in drunk)* The King is furious. His grand sacrifice was a flop, and he was shamed in front of all the princes. He even sent some thugs to rough me up and take back the money for the Kinnari. Now he's threatening war if she isn't brought back.

**Black out**

**Scene Three**

*in Sithon's private rooms, lounging on pillows together*

SITHON

*(seated with Manola)* You still want to fly away?

MANOLA

Not just this minute.

SITHON

*(teases)* Tomorrow?

MANOLA

Perhaps tomorrow's...tomorrow.

SITHON

Are you glad it was me who rescued you?

MANOLA

You? I thought the rats nibbled the ropes binding my hands.

SITHON

I had them secretly released to create panic.

MANOLA

Smart little creatures. *(teasing)* I'm as grateful to them as to you.

SITHON

Perhaps you'd rather marry a rat?

MANOLA

Marry? Who said anything about marrying?

SITHON

I am...now.

MANOLA

I'm not really a woman. I'm a bird, a spirit of the forest.

SITHON

You're enough of a woman to satisfy me. Will you fly away when I leave the room to ask for my father's approval?

MANOLA

You know I can't. You've hidden my wings.

SITHON

Marry me, or if not, I'll give you your wings and never see you again. Tomorrow I have to face Sucandrima's army. He's demanded you back.

MANOLA

I'm only an excuse. He wants your timber.

SITHON

I know. He's always said the forest is his, not ours.

MANOLA

Take me with you. I can fly high and report on his army's movements.

SITHON

No, you'll be safer with my family. So, when I return, will you be here?

MANOLA

I'll wait...for my husband. *(she gives him a ring)*

#### **Scene Four**

*in PENCHANG'S COURT*

MINISTER

The King promised Sithon to my sister, so when the prince went and married that Kinnari witch, I had to do something.

PRIEST

Yes, he really spoiled your plans.

MINISTER

He's endangering the whole country.

PRIEST

What have you heard from the front?

MINISTER

Sithon is winning.

PRIEST

But you've intercepted all messages?

MINISTER

Yes, it's been two weeks since the King has had any word of his son.

PRIEST

Then we must act before Sithon returns.

KING P

*(An anguished cry from the king off stage. He enters)* My counselors, I've had a most horrible dream. I was captured by Sucandrima. He plunged his sword into my belly and pulled out my intestines, and then wound them around the city three times.

PRIEST

A portentous vision!

MINISTER

Sire, we have just had word that Prince Sithon has been captured. Sucandrima is marching on the capital.

KING P

Is Sithon is alive?

MINISTER

We don't know.

KING P

We must prepare the city. Barricade all gates.

MINISTER

Sire, such measures have already been taken, but they will be for nothing if we continue to harbor a witch.

KING P

What witch? The Kinnari?

PRIEST

The cause of all our trouble. If she is sacrificed, the city stands a chance. If not, Sucandrima will tear down every brick to get her.

KING P

If I hurt her, Sithon will kill me.

PRIEST

Sithon's life is already forfeit.

MINISTER

You must think of the safety of your people and your person.

PRIEST

Shall I prepare the sacrifice? (*King nods and exits*)

**Black out**

### **Scene Five**

*in the Penchang Court*

MINISTER

(*Manora is brought in bound*) You're responsible for the war and the gods will only be appeased by your death.

MANOLA

The birds tell me Sithon has won and is already returning.

MINISTER

The king is in despair and the people hate you. Prepare the fire. (*exit*)

KING P

*(King and Queen enter)* Manola, you've thrown our world into chaos.

MANOLA

I'm weak and completely in your power, but if you kill a spirit of the forest, you doom yourself.

KING P

Enough!

MANOLA

Oh queen, let me perform my sacred dance. It has saved cities from the plague, and may save you.

QUEEN

Surely we may let her dance one last time. Fetch her wings.

KING P

Then dance, Manola, your last dance. *Sound of drums, Manola dances and then flies away)*

MINISTER

*(running in with priest)* What have you done? Seize her!

MANOLA

*(from above)* Oh king, beware. I disappear but your son approaches. *(The sound of different drumming as Sithon arrives with army. Minister and Priest exit.)*

SITHON

*(he rushes in)* Father, where's the welcome for the victorious army? Why didn't you greet us at the gate?

QUEEN

My son!

KING P

How did you escape?

SITHON

Escape? I was never caught. Ours was a steady route of Sucandrima's troops from the very beginning.

KING P

We heard only of your defeat.

SITHON

Then someone was hoping to benefit by such reports. Where's Manola?

KING P

Gone.

SITHON

Did you kill her?



QUEEN

Sithon, truly she's flown away on her own wings. But we're not guiltless...we thought you were dead, and Sucandrima was going to attack the city, and the Kinnari, was the cause.

KING P

I ordered her sacrifice, but your mother was wiser and allowed her to escape.

SITHON

I don't blame you. You were deceived. But I'm going to search for her. Since all I know is that her kingdom is far away and difficult to reach, you may truly have lost a son this day. *(he exits a different direction as they exit)*

**Black out**

MANOLA

*(spot light, dances in flight)* But the king is right. We can't mix, human and Kinnari. We're too different. Love blinded us, but eventually we'd realize it wasn't possible. I'm glad to go back to my Kinnari kingdom. *(knocks on a gate)* Gatekeeper, let me in.

GATEKEEPER

Turn back! No one can enter.

MANOLA

I'm Manola, the King's daughter.

GATEKEEPER

I know who you are and you, especially, are not allowed in. The whole kingdom is suffering from the Avian Flu. Everyone inside is quarantined, and no one allowed to enter, especially those who've been in contact with humans.

MANOLA

Avian flu? What's that? I'll take any test to prove I don't have it.

GATEKEEPER

No, the law stands. You will not be allowed in until 7 years, 7 months, 7 days have passed. Then you must undertake purifying rites to wash away the taint of humanity.

MANOLA

Taint of humanity?

GATEKEEPER

A very bad stink. I can smell it from here.

MANOLA

What absurdity. But tell me, how are my parents? My sisters?

GATEKEEPER

Alive.

MANOLA

Tell them I'm alive too. I'll return when the period of penance is over. *(exit)*

**BLACK OUT**

## Scene Six

*Kinnari sisters are standing above and look down*

DARA

What can Manola do now? She can't come home for seven years and it will take Sithon at least that long to find her. He is having adventures with a magic lemon a hermit gave to him.

KALEA

A lemon?

DARA

In those days, lemons could be magic.

LANI

But even a magic lemon couldn't help him when he got to the sea of corrosive waters that dissolved anything that fell into them.

DARA

Or when he crossed the river inhabited by a giant catfish whose whiskers are said to be able to cut a person in half.

LANI

Now he wouldn't need it; there are almost no more giant catfish left.

KALEA

Hey, stop. We're supposed to be telling *her* story, not his. Manola is wandering around in the forest not knowing what to do...

DARA

When suddenly the forest starts to blaze.

LANI

She runs, her eyes water, her throat stings, even her wings are too weak to fly.

KALEA

The farmers are burning the forest to clear land and grow rice. But we Kinnari, are creatures of the forest not the rice field. What can she do?

MANOLA

*(comes in coughing)* This smoke! I can't breathe! The crackle of burning trees hurts my ears; the panic of birds flying every which way pains my heart. I can do nothing to save them.

FEUCHY

Come away from there.

HOUA

Help her. She'll get burnt. *(Feuchy grabs Manola)* Come with me. I'll give you water.

FEUCHY

*(the fires dies out)* Well, that should be enough for this year. But the soil is not good. We'll have to move again next year.

MANOLA

Oh, but you can't keep burning the forest.

HOUA

We have to. There isn't enough land to grow rice.

MANOLA

No, it's too terrible. You get valuable things like bamboo shoots, mushrooms, chestnuts, and medicinal herbs from the woods too.

FEUCHY

Don't listen to her. We've heard all this before.

HOUA

We need to grow rice to feed our family. The officials come and tell us to grow fruit. We grow peaches, but they're seasonal. Banana and papaya grow up here and their roots help to hold the soil, but we're too far away from the market to sell them.

MANOLA

You could build a road.

FEUCHY

We don't have the time or the money. Besides, our people are spread all over the mountain; we'd need several roads.

HOUA

We're told by the government not to burn the forest, but we can't leave the land fallow as long as we did before. We have to move more often now.

MANOLA

You could plant other things.

FEUCHY

Yes, like the lucky devils in the lowland who grow teak to build their houses. But teak doesn't grow here in the uplands. And then there's rubber. They want us to work on rubber plantations, but those belong to foreigners. We would have nothing. At least now we have rice to eat.

HOUA

The rubber company says it will give us rice for seven years while the trees grow, but then we have to pay for the rice in rubber sap we collect.

FEUCHY

That would make us dependent on them forever. The rubber plantations are taking up more land, forcing us to move on.

MANOLA

But whose land is it?

FEUCHY

That's the big question.

HOUA

The land is never ours; only what we plant on it. We used to plant pigeon pea and maize in between the rice rows, and Siam weed in the fallow fields. It helped fertilize the soil and keep the nematodes away. But now we can't leave the land fallow long enough. We have to spend more time weeding...and moving.

FEUCHY

Our animals helped fertilize the soil, but the rubber owners don't like them and people have had to sell their cows, pigs and goats. What can we do?

MANOLA

Well, you can't keep burning the forest.

HOUA

We know that, but it's not fair. We burn, but they cut. Look over there...see the whole side of the mountain has been cut bare, but not by us.

MANOLA

My forest is being attacked by everybody. Where will the Kinnari live when all the trees are gone?

HOUA

You can stay with us.

MANOLA

I'm not a rice farmer.

HOUA

Can you weave?

MANOLA

No. I know what I'll do. I'll plant tall trees, like Pine (*Pinus kesiya*) and Hing (*Keteleeria evelyniana*) Mi (*Schima wallichii*), Sakai (*Betula alnoides*) for the Kinnari and other birds. If you help me collect seeds, I'll plant the seedlings in the fallow ground.

FEUCHY

They'll take too long to grow.

MANOLA

But we must replant the burned trees. All the soil will wash away. There'll be mudslides.

FEUCHY

You're just like all the other NGOs, you come and you go.

MANOLA

I've been in the forest for a thousand years, far longer than you.

FEUCHY

Listen to her, now she's claiming the land is hers.

HOUA

I think her plan is not bad. Let's go ask the village headman.

FEUCHY

He'll never let you. He'll say they want it for rubber even though the market is so bad that the foreign rubber farmers are cutting down their own trees. They just want the timber.

HOUA

Oh headman. We have a proposal.

XIENG MIENG

*(a traditional comic character; he is missing a leg; he holds out his hand)* What's the budget?

HOUA

No budget.

XIENG

Then don't bother me.

MANOLA

Oh, I have a huge budget.

XIENG

*(sees Manola)* Oh, who is this pretty creature?

HOUA

Can't you see she's a Kinnari?

XIENG

*(rubs his eyes)* That's what I thought. Well? Dollars? Euro?

MANOLA

Even better. *(she makes gestures of counting money)* Have you ever seen so much money in your life?

XIENG

Huh?

MANOLA

One thousand, one hundred thousand, one million.

XIENG

Huh?

MANOLA

Invisible money. So convenient. You can carry as much of it as you like and no one will ever try to rob you.

XIENG

That's for sure.

HOUA

Hah, tricked by your own scam!

XIENG

What good is invisible money?

MANOLA

It's an investment. You might not see it today, but it becomes visible in the future. My proposal is to plant tree seeds.

XIENG

Well, that should keep you busy...for a century or two. No one here can help you. We're too busy planting rice. Besides, the forest replants itself as secondary forest, the "Bpa lau".

MANOLA

I'll make a program with a representative in town to attract tourists. They can pay to adopt seedlings or come to plant them. Let tourists feel useful in the place they're visiting. We just have to get organized. (*they mime work*)

DARA

So Manola begins her project. She collects seeds before the farmers burn, and then when they move, she returns to plant them. She works long and hard but gradually more people help her.

LANI

The seven years pass and she returns to us. Each day we fly out to collect seeds with her and the planting goes much faster.

KALEA

Seven years pass, the seedlings grow into small trees, and Sithon draws near the lake, still our forbidden paradise. He hears us laughing as we bathe. He does not recognize Manola. She is browned by the sun. Her delicate features are coarser from her work, but then he hears her voice, and knows that it is her.

MANOLA

(*rests on her shovel*) Well Sithon, you finally made it.

SITHON

I've risked my life many times to get here.

MANOLA

Have you had your fill of adventures and ready to settle down?

SITHON

Living with you will be the biggest adventure of all.

MANOLA

A good answer. But do you still want me? I'm not as beautiful as before.

SITHON

I am older too, and wiser.

MANOLA

Another good answer, but first I must ask the headman.

SITHON

Not your father?

MANOLA

My father passed away—Avian flu decimated our family and the city. Xieng Mieng is in charge now.

SITHON

Our fate is to be decided by that trickster?

XIENG

*(enters and overhears)* So this is the famous Pra Sithon? He doesn't look so impressive. I'd better test him to make sure he really loves you, Manola.

SITHON

I'm prepared to be tested, but not tricked.

XIENG

Well, don't expect any golden fly to help you. Such magic creatures went extinct long ago. You're supposed to be a smart educated fellow. We want you to build a road. One that won't wash out in the next big rain.

SITHON

What? A road by myself?

XIENG

Your love not strong enough? Don't worry, we'll help but you must plan it.

SITHON

All right, then I'll begin.

XIENG

And that's not all. After the road is built, I am sending you on a journey.

MANOLA

That's not fair. He's already been traveling for so long.

XIENG

So he has experience. He can ride his vulture if he wants to. He's going to Washington DC.

SITHON

Ah so far! I'll need many vultures.

XIENG

There you go to Congress and make a proposal that America come get the gifts it left behind.

SITHON

What gifts?

XIENG

The 'bombies' must have been gifts, since we never asked for them. Once the landmines are cleared off, we'll have much more land to cultivate and won't have to burn the forest. Too much land, too many legs have been sacrificed to the bombies. I want them gone for good.

SITHON

I thought America recently gave more money for the cleanup.

XIENG

It's not enough. We need expertise. Sniffer dogs, equipment. It's their responsibility. You tell my friend Michael Honda to persuade Congress to clear away these remnants of war.

SITHON

You're much cleverer than me. Besides...*(points to Xieng's leg)*. You should go.

XIENG

But you're a handsome hero and will make a better impression.

MANOLA

Sorry, my love, you've been tricked.

XIENG

Yes, you'll have to do better when you get to Washington. We can never truly occupy our homeland until all the UXO are all gone.

SITHON

Manola, are you willing to wait so long.

MANOLA

It's not forever. The UXO need to be cleared.

SITHON

That might take another seven years.

MANOLA

By then, my forest will have grown. For you, I'll plant a lemon tree to insure your safe journey.

XIENG

Removing the bombies won't just help us rice farmers, it'll help heal other war wounds too, the distrust between Lao Soung, Lao Theung and Lao Loum. Once the bombies are gone, we can begin to think about working together for the future.

SITHON

I'll leave tomorrow. Manola, I've never seen you dance. Will you put on your wings and dance for us. *(all the Kinnari come down and dance together)*

**The End**