

Po and Tiger

KETEP's "Po and Tiger" was adapted from a Burmese folk tale "Master Po and the Tiger" in *Burmese Folk Tales* by Maung Htin Aung, (Oxford UP, 1959). The original story is astonishingly critical of human's abuse of the natural environment and required little alteration to emphasize the plight of the tiger that is on the verge of extinction in the Burmese forests. Not only are the forests being logged by China, but China is the destination for tiger products. During the performance, one could hear the drums and cymbals of passing martial arts groups celebrating Chinese New Year, the Year of the Tiger.

The forty-five minute show was on the main stage of the iUi#2 International Festival of Contemporary Theatre & Performance sponsored by Theatre of the Disturbed and the French Institute in Yangon, Myanmar. The participants were students, journalists, housewives, theatre directors, and acting teachers. They translated the script into Burmese, rehearsed it, and prepared its final staging with lighting, costumes and a set, which was all taken from the plants on the grounds, except for the cage that was made from plastic bottles collected for recycling.

Summary:

A village boy, Po, becomes best friends with orphaned baby Tiger in the forest, but when full grown, Tiger wants to steal chickens from the village. Po tries to dissuade him and refuses to help, but Tiger persists, and is caught and encaged. He persuades Po to release him and when he does, Tiger who is starving to death, says he will eat him. Po says such ingratitude is unacceptable, but Tiger insists that they let the forest judge. They ask Banyan Tree and Buffalo Skull that both respond that men have failed to show gratitude for their services and tell Tiger to go ahead and eat Po. Only clever Rabbit manages to trick Tiger back into the cage. **KETEP's** version presents several alternative endings that further consider Tiger's future.

Cast:

Little Po
Big Po
Little Tiger
Big Tiger
Headman
Villagers 1, 2, 3
Buffalo Skull
Banyan Tree
Rabbit
Chicken
Official

Po and Tiger

Scene 1

Po: *(Po walking through the woods hears a sound and sees the baby Tiger.)*

Tiger: Mew, mew.

Po: A little tiger. I'd better run away fast or its mother will kill me. *(he returns the next day.)*

Tiger: Mew, mew. Don't run away. I'm all alone and dying of hunger. My mother was shot, my father was trapped. Please help!

Po: I've caught a little mouse. Do you want to eat it?

Tiger: I'm too small. I need Tiger's milk. *(Po returns the next day with some milk. Tiger is almost dead.)*

Tiger: Thank you. You've saved my life. We can be friends if you like.

Po: *(stroking Tiger.)* You're just a little kitten. You can be my pet.

Tiger: I may be little, but I'm wild and can be no one's pet. Treat me with respect and we can be friends. Now get up, and I'll race you to that clump of bamboo. Ready, set, go. *(They race.)*

Po: I won.

Tiger: Enjoy your victory now. It won't last long. Now I'll race you up to the top of that tree.

Po: *(Po tries to climb.)* I can't make it all the way up.

Tiger: You need claws to grip and a tail to balance.

Po: I'll bring my bow and arrow tomorrow and we can go hunting together. *(they swim, race, wrestle, improvise dialogue)*

Scene 2

Po: *(tries to play)* What's wrong, Tiger? You seem a bit moody recently.

Tiger: We're both growing up. When we were kids, it was easy to live in the same world and play together, but now even though we're still friends, the world is separating us.

Po: Are you still worried about your Tiger identity? I know you don't feel all tiger because your parents were killed and couldn't teach you, and instead you hung out with me, a human. But I tell you, you are 100% Tiger.

Tiger: I've never been with other Tigers.

Po: Tigers are solitary creatures; they don't hang out together much.

Tiger: But still I'm not fulfilling my Tiger destiny. I'll have to leave soon and search for a mate.

Po: Don't you care about your friend?

Tiger: You'll be leaving me soon, too. You're grown up and have to go to work. You don't have time to roam the forest with me.

Po: Maybe we won't be able to see each other as often, but we'll still be friends. We'll always be friends.

Tiger: Thank you for trying to understand me. We both know that your people consider my people ferocious, dangerous and evil. They forget that we once co-existed peacefully. We never attacked humans until they started destroying the forest for their plantations. Holy hermits lived among us without harm, don't your own *jatakas* say so?

Po: Oh Tiger, that was long ago. And besides, I don't think it was really ever like that. It's only a pretty idea that human people like to believe. Animals and people have always been enemies. We kill you or you eat us. That's been the rule.

Tiger: But I don't want to eat you. You smell bad.

Po: I do not! Have you smelled your breath recently?

Tiger: Pah! There are many other more delicious creatures; you don't even tempt me. I'd only fight you if you threatened me. If we can be friends, why can't other people manage? You humans always kill even when it's not necessary. Fear and Greed rule your minds, and you are supposed to be the most intelligent of animals. Perhaps I'm too stupid to understand, or perhaps you're not as smart as you think. We only hunt to eat and only fight to protect ourselves.

Po: Tiger, your logic is backwards. We kill you to protect ourselves. If you didn't attack us or our animals, we wouldn't bother you in the forest.

Tiger: Ha, you're just an ignorant boy. What do you know about bogus Chinese medicines that use our body parts, aphrodisiacs for weak men, and fat nouveau riche businessmen hanging our skins on their walls? You humans have never left us in peace. You don't know moderation like the rest of the animals. You destroy everything you touch.

Po: People are curious...and greedy. But what's that to do with you and me? I don't want your body parts, silly Tiger. You're most valuable to me as a friend. Friends understand each other even when no one else does; they help each other when no one else is willing. That's what friendship is.

Tiger: Can you really be friends with me? Aren't all creatures only friends with their own kind?

Po: Look how difficult it is for humans to be friends with each other; one group is always fighting another. I think it is easier to be friends with you than the boys in the village.

Tiger: You're special, my friend Po.

Po: So are you, friend Tiger.

Scene 3 (*The forest is cut down, many animals starve. As older boys (different actors), Po and Tiger hunt rabbits together. Po takes rabbit home to family. Tiger kills only two a day to eat. But forest is being damaged—logging, road building, hunting by many people with guns. The rabbits, deer are fewer and fewer.*)

Po: (*sitting down, exhausted*) We've been hunting all day and caught only one monkey.

Tiger: Your people have cut all the trees, even the little ones. The land is all burned so only shrubs and grasses grow. All the parrots and hornbills are gone.

Po: The big trees are sold north of the border. And farmers burn the undergrowth. They need more land. But I don't know why they had to pollute the stream too. Now we can't even fish or hunt turtles.

Tiger: We need the woods as they were.

Po: Without food, the deer must have gone higher up on the mountain.

Tiger: They can't survive higher up. It's too cold and there's nothing for them to eat. You're not here day and night like me. Hunters come with big guns and shoot many rabbits, and deer, and of course they aim for me. It's dangerous for both of us to be out now. You can't be seen with me because they might hit you instead. Our peaceful days are over. We should go our separate ways. You take the rabbit as a souvenir of better times.

Po: No, dear Tiger, the rabbit is yours. You caught it and need it. I can eat rice and vegetables. My family has chickens and eggs. I worry about you. What will you do? (*ask audience*) What would you do?

Tiger: (*slyly*) You could bring me a chicken.

Po: Oh, no, my parents would never let me. I haven't told anyone that you're my friend. They wouldn't understand.

Tiger: Ah, you see. Humans don't allow it.

Po: Maybe next you'll think of eating me? Do you think our friendship can endure against the instinct to hunt and kill?

Tiger: Your instinct or mine? Instinct concerns survival—to kill for food or to protect oneself. Till now we've helped each other survive, but perhaps only one of us can survive.

Scene 4 (*Two days pass and Po is busy with school and helping his parents. he doesn't go into the forest. When he finally goes, he finds the tiger lying down, too weak to get up.*)

Po: Dear Tiger, what's happened? Are you sick? Injured?

Tiger: (*He roars*) I am starving to death, you stupid fool. There are no more rabbits, the forest is destroyed. If you're my friend, you'll take me to the village and introduce me to your parents. Perhaps they'll take me as their godson and feed me.

Po: No, my parents would never do that. They're afraid of tigers. If they knew we were together, they would forbid me to come into the forest.

Tiger: Then you must bring me a chicken secretly; otherwise I'll starve.

Po: All right, but just this once. I can't keep doing it, you understand. You'll have to figure out another way to survive.

Tiger: Yes, alright. Hurry.

Scene 5 (*Po leaves. Tiger waits. Po does not return. At night, Tiger goes and catches a chicken himself.*)

Tiger: Child's play. Why did I wait so long for such easy prey? At least now I know I have plentiful food and don't have to depend on that foolish Po. One cannot rely on humans.

Po: (*runs in breathless*) Tiger, Tiger what have you done? You stole a chicken.

Tiger: You said you'd bring me one and you didn't. I can't trust you. You're not my friend anymore. A real friend doesn't lie, doesn't let his friend die.

Po: I tried to catch one, but my mother was always watching. Believe me, I tried to help you. Look, I brought two eggs, but it was too dark last night for me to come.

Tiger: Thanks for the eggs, but I can take care of myself now.

Po: Tiger, don't return to the village. People are already setting a trap for you.

Tiger: Just because of one chicken? What miserliness! They destroy my entire forest and then complain when I come for one little chicken. If I had been a hungry human guest, they'd have killed it to honor me.

Po: They weren't the destroyers. You know, outsiders came to cut down the trees. Once the trees were gone, they disappeared, didn't they? The villagers don't care about one chicken. They're afraid you'll attack a buffalo calf next, or even a buffalo. They know tigers are smart and once a tiger knows stealing a chicken is so easy, he'll come again and again. Tiger, stay away. If you come, I won't be able to help you.

Tiger: I don't need your help. I'm a full grown tiger now, and a match for any of the villagers. If they try to trap me, I'll kill them. It's always the humans that start the war and then blame us when they get injured. If they hadn't destroyed the forest, I'd have happily stayed away from their precious village. Now, go.

Po: Tiger, it can't be so bad in the forest. Come, let's hunt now. I'm sure we'll be lucky today.

Tiger: Forget it, Po. I can't hunt in the day now—hunters are always after me. It's only safe for me at night. Our days of roaming together are over. Don't cry to me—blame your own people.

Po: Yes, but it's not *my* fault. Don't forget, you're my best friend and I'll never betray you.

Tiger: In the forest, I could see, smell, hear better than you, run faster, and catch my prey that I always shared with you. Now, we both live in *your* territory and I am the vulnerable one. I'll remember your words, Po. I hope you won't regret them.

Scene 6 (*Tiger returns to the village that night, kills another chicken. He is dragging it back to the forest, when dog's barking wakes the villagers.*)

Vil 1: (*villagers wake up, talking altogether*) What's that noise? The Tiger's come again! Has he attacked the cow? Neighbors! Friends! Come quickly! The Tiger's come! Bring your ropes! (*the villagers catch Tiger and put him in a cage and stand around it and stare.*)

Vil 2: There's the evil monster. Let him roar and die.

Vil 1: Look how big his teeth are.

Vil 3: If we had not caught it, it might have stolen my baby in the night.

Vil 1: It would have killed all our chickens.

Vil 2: and goats.

Vil 3: and cows!

Vil 1: and then it would attack our children

Vil 2: and us.

Vil 3: Leave it there to starve and die. (*Tiger roars and they all run away.*)

Head: Go see if Tiger is dead yet. Then we can sell his skin and meat. (*Tiger roars weakly. Villager 2 shrugs his shoulders and reports back.*)

Vil 2: Still alive, but tomorrow he'll be dead.

Po: (*creeps toward cage when others are gone.*) Tiger, my friend, are you still alive?

Tiger: Why do you ask? You don't care if I live or die.

Po: I do.

Tiger: Why don't you come to mock me with your people friends?

Po: I'd never do that. What can I do to help?

Tiger: Bring me something to eat.

Po: I have. I've brought a dead dog.

Tiger: I can't eat old meat.

Po: Beggars can't be choosers. Be sure to eat everything or they'll suspect someone is feeding you.

Tiger: (*whispers*) Listen Po, tonight come and let me out.

Po: I can't.

Tiger: I'll run to the woods and never come back. Neither you nor any other villager will ever see me again. I'll never return to this accursed village.

Po: I don't dare.

Tiger: Have you become such a coward? Nothing will happen to you. No one will know who sets me free.

Po: I can't.

Tiger: You don't trust me.

Po: No...no, I trust you.

Tiger: Are you my friend? This is the one and only test of our friendship. I will never ask anything from you again. Prove that people and tigers can be friends.

Scene 7 (*Tiger is dying. He can barely move and does not lift his head or roar when Villagers come to check on him, or when Po comes in the night.*)

Po: Tiger, are you awake? Are you alive?

Tiger: Goodbye Po, I should have taken your advice and never come to the village, but starvation does not promote rational thinking. Think of me, our friendship from time to time. Remember how beautiful the forest was....

Po: You thought the forest beautiful?

Tiger: Yes, of course.

Po: I thought only humans could see beauty.

Tiger: The human imagination is very weak...limited, unfortunately, to themselves. Farewell. I die.

Po: Are you really dying?

Tiger: Can't you see? I can no longer stand.

Po: Oh, Tiger, I can't bear to see you so miserable. I'll open the door and let you go.

Tiger: Too late, Po. Your act now will only make you feel better. It does me no good at all. Opening the door would only mock my weakness. I am too feeble to rise or run.

Po: No, Tiger, I know freedom will give you strength. There (*Po opens cage door*). Now flee back to the woods and be the free beautiful Tiger I have always known. (*Tiger crawls slowly out.*)

Scene 8

Po: You must run quickly before anyone sees that you.

Tiger: I'm too weak. Help me. (*Tiger puts arms around Po*)

Po: You might be weak and thin, but you're still too big and heavy for me to carry.

Tiger: Then I have no choice but to eat you first before I return to the forest.

Po: Eat me!

Tiger: You didn't bring me food. You didn't let me out when I still had the strength to move. It's your own fault, Po. It's always human's fault. Why shouldn't I eat you?

Po: Why? Because we're friends, that's why.

Tiger: Friendship can't exist under such unequal conditions.

Po: But you should be grateful to me. I've always helped you as best I could, even if you say it wasn't enough. When can it ever be enough?

Tiger: And what about gratitude to me? Days when you caught nothing, I gave you one of my rabbits to take back to your family. When the mice and rabbits went into the fields to eat the rice and fruit, I ate them so the crops wouldn't be destroyed. The farmers benefited, and look, what gratitude they show me! There is no debt of gratitude between us—it was all an illusion. At the first real test, you failed.

Po: All right, if you must eat me, you must. But let us first settle this question about the debt of gratitude. We'll go to the forest and ask the first creature we see if it exists or not. If 'yes,' you let me go, if 'no,' I must give in to my fate. Agree?

Scene 9

Tiger: I'm very hungry, and I suspect a trick. You humans are always up to no-good, especially when you are pretending to be the most reasonable. But if any creature says 'yes,' I'll just eat it instead, and let you go. But we had better find something quickly. It won't be easy. So few animals are left in the forest to ask. Hurry! I won't be able to control myself for very long. (*They walk and come to Buffalo Skull on the ground.*)

Po: Dear Skull, will you help us judge a case?

Tiger: I can't eat a skull.

Po: I freed Tiger from the cage. Is there a debt of gratitude between Tiger and me?

Skull: No. I was a kind and peaceful buffalo, and everyday I helped the farmer plough his fields. He could not work without me. But when I grew too old to work, did he let me live out my days in peace? No! He killed and ate me! Humans show no debt of gratitude. Eat him!

Tiger: Hah! You see! No such thing exists. Humans only think it up when they want gratitude given, but they never think about giving it. Don't worry, Po. I'll break your neck first so you won't feel pain. You see, I am even more "humane" in my killing than you humans.

Po: Oh dear Tiger. Don't eat me yet. Skull isn't a real creature, but only old bones. No wonder he feels bitter. Let's ask another. Certainly we can get a more fair opinion from a someone still alive.

Tiger: You mean one that favors you. All right, one more, but now I'm so hungry I don't even care what others think. (*they walk through desolate forest*) You made a mistake, Po; there's nothing left in the forest to ask. Everything's been killed off. You should have stayed in the village to ask your ethical questions.

Po: Look, over there is a Banyan Tree. Let's take a rest in its shade and ask it.

Tiger: Can banyans talk?

Po: Banyan, I freed Tiger from the cage and saved his life. Does he owe me a debt of gratitude?

Ban: (*spits*) What debt! Here you come to rest in my shade. But when it suits you, you break my limbs—imagine my breaking your arms and legs—and pick my flowers—imagine me pulling your hair out—and when you need fire wood, you just cut me down without a second thought. My strong roots hold the ground in place so the rain doesn't wash away the soil for your crops. Birds nest in my branches. I host thousands of insects. I am useful to the whole forest, but you humans only think about your own needs and convenience. Sometimes when you cut me down, you don't even use my wood and just throw away to make way for a road or plantation. Now I stand alone; my family and neighbors have all been cut. My days are numbered. Don't talk to me of gratitude—you humans don't know what it means!

Tiger: You see! The whole forest condemns you. What did you expect from stumps and corpses? Now I'll not only eat you because I'm hungry, but for justice. You used to hunt and play in this forest, how could you let it all be destroyed?

Po: (*crying*) I was just one little boy. Don't you remember our kindness to each other?

Tiger: I remember it fondly, but I'm starving. Wouldn't you kill me if you were starving? Of course, you would. Your time is up.

Po: Give me one last chance. I would give it to you.

Tiger: All right, but remember you can only face three judges for the same case. Whoever we find will be your very last. *(he hears something)* What's that? I heard something behind the bush over there. *(they run, a rabbit jumps out and runs away)*

Scene 10

Po: Stop Rabbit! We need you to decide a case.

Rab: No, no, I won't stop. I know both of you want to eat me. *(Tiger pounces on rabbit and is about to eat it.)*

Po: No, Tiger, don't eat it. We must ask it first.

Tiger: Why? If I eat it, I don't have to eat you.

Rab: *(to Po)* Don't let him eat me. I'll do whatever you want.

Po: Ask first!

Tiger: Then eat. See, you say nothing, Po. This Rabbit's life means nothing to you; you just want to save your own at anybody else's expense.

Po: Of course, I am like every other creature.

Tiger: Ah, so you finally admit it. You're learning not to be so high and mighty about your 'humanity.'

Po: Rabbit, I freed Tiger from the cage and saved his life. Does he owe me a debt of gratitude or not?

Rab: Hmmmm....

Tiger: No dawdling. Say yes or no, now!

Rab: Well, I really need to see how it happened before I can decide.

Tiger: No, you're not fooling me. I'm not going back into the village for any reason. I'm going to eat you right now and then eat Po. Once we tigers have been trapped, we remember and will not fall for the same trick twice.

Rab: This is not a real trap, but just play acting. In fact, I think Po didn't free you at all. I think you are strong enough to break down the door of the cage by yourself. You wouldn't need this skinny little fellow to help a big strong tiger like you.

Tiger: *(puffing up)* Well, I...I...

Po: I'm not skinny!

Rab: *(to Po)* Hush! *(to Tiger)* I have to at least see if the door has been broken down. If it's broken, then Po is lying and you not only *can* eat him, but you *should* eat him. Now, Tiger, if you'll please lead the way. *(they walk, and come to the cage)* Hmmmm...it is difficult to tell if it has been broken.

Tiger: See, it's been wrenched off here.

Rab: Possibly.

Po: But the catch is not broken; it's been opened...by me.

Rab: But it looks weak and would not hold.

Tiger: It was strong.

Rab: No, I think with one stroke of your mighty paw, it would break.

Tiger: No, I had to cleverly wear down the hinges here.

Rab: But they are still holding.

Tiger: *(impatient, Tiger goes into the cage)* Nonsense, look this is how...

Rab: Po, quick lock the door.

Tiger: *(still not noticing he has been locked in and is fiddling with the hinges)* You see...What! *(he roars)* Open up immediately. Po, you creature of bad faith. Only my sense of fairness allowed you three judges. I could have eaten you immediately and no one would blame me. We have both been tricked by this scheming Rabbit.

Rab: I have restored the *status quo* and put the Tiger back in his place and Po is in his place before your dispute began.

Scene 11 *(Rabbit, Po and Tiger turn to the audience and ask "What happens now?" The lights go off momentarily and/or a bell rings. The three actors begin turning in backward circles and, like wind-up dolls, move backwards as if going back in time. They will now present other alternatives, each time performing the backward movement sequence to undo what was just done. Further alternatives can be added by either the participants or audience members.)*

Alternate Ending A

Rab: *(Po and Rabbit stand outside the cage with Tiger locked inside.)* There Po, you're safe, but you're my enemy too, and now I must run away from you. *(he moves slightly away)*

Po: Tiger, now you'll die slowly of starvation in the cage. It was all your own foolishness and pride that betrayed you.

Tiger: Rabbit, you can run away, but you'll die slowly of starvation too, since the forest has all been destroyed.

Rab: No, I won't. I can come into the fields now and eat the lovely green rice stalks. Yum! I won't need to fear tigers anymore. And then there'll be more and more rabbits. We'll take over the world. Rabbits unite! *(makes a fist and shakes it.)*

Tiger: *(to himself)* I wonder if the farmers will miss me when they're overrun with rabbits. But Rabbit, they'll trap you, shoot you, poison you. You'll not live much longer than me for all your cleverness.

Alternate Ending B.

Po: *(he catches Rabbit)* Rabbit, thank you for saving my life, but I've learned there's no debt of gratitude. So, I'm going to feed you to poor Tiger. *(Po thrusts Rabbit into the cage.)*

Tiger: I'll enjoy my last meal thoroughly. Revenge will sweeten this smart ass Rabbit's flesh. *(Rabbit tussles with Tiger and Tiger settles down to enjoy his feast.)*

Alternate Ending C.

Tiger: *(Po and Rabbit stand outside the cage.)* Po, catch that scheming Rabbit and feed it to me.

Po: No, I am going to eat Rabbit myself. *(Po catches Rabbit.)*

Rab: Tiger, you were right. Humans only think of themselves. Doesn't Po owe me his life? Look how he thanks me.

Tiger: Don't expect me to pity you.

Po: No more talk. Rabbit, my mother will cook you and my sister will wear your soft skin. Farmers will congratulate me for killing a rabbit that was eating their grain. We'll sell the Tiger's body parts and skin and be rich. My family will profit from both of you. Then we'll live in an all-human world. The fewer wild animals, the better.

Alternate Ending D.

Rab: Tiger, you're right. You only kill rabbits when you're hungry, but the villagers kill as many as they can. So I'll let you out, if you promise to stop eating rabbits and kill humans instead. *(Rabbit opens the cage door.)*

Tiger: It's a deal, and I'll start with the betrayer, Po. *(he seizes Po)*

Po: I never betrayed our friendship!

Tiger: I'm making a new friendship with Rabbit, and a new alliance, 'Animals against humans.'

Alternate Ending E.

(An Official seizes Po with dead Tiger.)

Off: Hunting tigers is illegal. Selling tiger parts is illegal. Don't you know they're on the endangered list?

Po: But this was a man-eating tiger!

Off: Oh, then it's okay, if you killed it in self defense. How many men did the tiger kill?

Po: Uh, none, but he wanted to kill one.

Off: How do you know? You're lying. I think you're a poacher. I am going to throw you in jail.

Po: He wanted to kill and eat *me*!

Off: How do you know?

Po: He told me.

Off: *He* told you? Forget jail. I am throwing you into a hospital for crazies. Talking tiger!

Alternate Ending F (*Skull and Banyan come on from other side of the stage. They enter walking backward and do the same wind-up routine as the others.*)

Skull: Hey Banyan, still here? You're showing some wear and tear.

Ban: You're not looking so great yourself. Your horns look shorter.

Skull: It's blessing they left me with any horns at all. You know how they like to make them into implements.

Ban: I guess it's only the two of us left. Funny, to think of how lively this place was once.

Skull: After the villagers farmed the forest land a few times, the soil was no good and they had to move on. Now no villagers, no tigers, no rabbits.

Ban: Just us.

Skull: Just us.

THE END