



Honour thy **BROTHER**

THE FRENCH MISSIONARY WHO PENNED THE THAI LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK SERIES FOR YOUNG STUDENTS IS REMEMBERED IN A NEW FILM

PARINYAPORN PAJEE
THE NATION

TODAY'S STUDENTS probably have no idea that the Thai language textbook series titled "Darunsuksa" was actually written by a foreigner.

That could be about to change with the release next month of a movie that looks at the life of Brother Francois Touvenet Hilaire, a young French priest who arrived in Siam in the early 1900s.

Surussavadi Chuarchart, the director of "F Hilaire" – the F stands for Frere, the French word for Brother – says the film is far more than a biography, adding that Brother Hilaire was also more than a teacher. "He was a foreigner who truly understood the Thai people's roots and nature," she says.

"The ideas reflected in his

poems, essays and articles, teach us to have integrity and not cheat," the director adds.

The film tells his story through Pongsatorn (Pharunyoo "Tac" Rojanawuttitham) a present-day teacher who is using the language book and researches Hilaire's life for his Master's Degree. His thesis adviser pushes him to look further into the story rather than just a French teacher writing Thai textbooks, and thus he delves deeper into Hilaire the man.

Brother Hilaire, who is played in the film by actor Jason Young, was one of the key persons in the history of Assumption College, a private Catholic all-boy school founded by another French priest, Rev Father Emile August Colombet. Hilaire's original Darunsuksa textbooks are still widely used in Catholic schools, so there's a possibility that the wider movie-going audience might not be interested in the story.

Surussavadi disagrees. "I don't think the film is all about Assumption. Brother Hilaire's influence extended far beyond the school gates. In fact, the film is directed at non-Assumption people," she says.

The film is based on Brother Hilaire's own recording of his life through his journal and letters as well as through his students, who included several of the country's most influential figures, such as the

country's first prime minister Phraya Manopakorn Niti Thada, former PM Sanya Dharmasakti who was also the head of privy council, and the respected economist Puey Ungpakorn.

Hilaire was among five reverend brothers assigned by the St Gabriel Foundation in France to take over the management of College de l'Assomption (later Assumption College) in 1901 at the request of Colombet. At 20, the youngest of the missionaries to be sent to Siam, he taught English and French to his Thai students and spent his spare time studying Thai. The Darunsuksa series was produced nine years later.

"He started learning Thai just as a child would, then used that experience to write the textbooks. They are not just about grammar but also filled with his own thoughts," says the director.

He also wrote articles, poems and translated English quotes into Thai. Some, such as Frederick Langbridge's quote "Two men look out the same prison bars; one sees mud and the other stars" are still in use today.

Half-Australian actor Young, who has spent two years as a monk, was an obvious choice for the role of the priest. The casting of Tac, though, comes as a surprise, as the actor has a "bad boy" image and is more often in the news for his per-



Brother Hilaire (left) also learnt Thai from young Thai kids when he first came to Siam in the early 1900s.

sonal life than for his work.

And that, Surussavadi says, is what makes him perfect for the role. "He is fairly typical of the young people of today who thinks the world revolves around them."

The Pongsatorn character was inspired by a real-life teacher who did his thesis on Brother Hilaire but the resemblance ends there. While the real teacher studied Brother Hilaire's work in depth, Pongsatorn's research is superficial and he is faced with the choice of either doing more work or failing his Master's degree.

"My point is to draw attention to how we just look at the surface, reading only the headlines and criticising. Pongsatorn's character will have the audience thinking about the kind of person he or she is and what he/she wants to be," says Surussavadi, who has previously worked on TV commercials, documentaries and movies made for television including the tale of unsung hero Khun Rong Palad Chu who merits a single paragraph in the history books.

In fact, the film was originally designed for small screen screening after being chosen for "The Idol Khon Bandal Jai" project, which focuses on stories about idols.

Produced by Bluering Company and OMAC, the St Gabriel's Foundation and the Brother Hilaire Foundation, the film crew includes several high-profile Thai industry figures such as Pen-ek

AN ANSWERED PRAYER

■ "F Hilaire" will be in theatres on July 9.



Director Surussavadi Chuarchart (wearing a cap) on the film set with Jason and Tac.



Present-day teacher Pongsatorn (Pharunyo "Tac" Ronawuttitham) researches Hilaire's life for his Master's degree thesis.



French missionary Brother Hilaire (Jason Young) learnt the Thai language with Thai students and wrote the Thai language textbook series titled “Darunsuksa” based on that experience.

Ratanaruang’s regular director of photography, Chankit Chamnivikaipong (“Headshot”, “Nymph”) and production designer Ek Iemchuen who co-wrote the script. It was shot mainly in Lop Buri province, home to many old buildings reminiscent of Bangkok in the early 1900s.

Originally planned to show in two 45-minute episodes, the project was unceremoniously dumped when the TV channel concerned changed its programming schedule.

The crew didn’t give up, trimming and re-editing the story and then convincing Five Star Entertainment to distribute it.