

2STARTUP  
By : Ellen Boonstra

# 52 THE MASTER PLANNER



Embroidered pants by Nagara



**EVENT PLANNER EXTRAORDINAIRE, KHUN KOOKIE OF KUDO COMPANY LTD. IS THE MASTERMIND BEHIND MANY OF BANGKOK'S MOST CELEBRATED EVENTS, SUCH AS THE GRAND OPENING OF SIAM PARAGON, THE VIVIENNE WESTWOOD EXHIBITION AT EMPORIUM'S TDC, AND, MOST RECENTLY, SHOWS AT ELLE FASHION WEEK.**

Thailand's most famous and certainly most colorful event organizer is Tinakorn Asavarak, a.k.a. Khun Kookie, founder of Kudo Company Limited. 2Magazine had the great pleasure of visiting this highly entertaining, energetic and animated one-man show at his 2-storey condo near Phaholyothin Road, Bangkok.

"You can tell that I'm not a minimalist," grins Khun Kookie as he waves his arms expansively around his home. Looking at the eclectic mix of decorative items and art pieces that adorn his living room – the standing lamp with feathered lampshade which greets visitors at the front door, the rhinoceros from famed art designer Lotus Arts de Vivre, the 15 Oriental carpets, the necklace on which he's sewn 58 of his late mother's rings (more on this later) -- it's clear that this is a man who adores art. On the second floor there's even a Renoir sketching, which Khun Kookie bought years ago when he first started his private art collection of local and international artists. "I had to sell my car to buy this piece!"

The Managing Director of Kudo Company, the event planning firm he set up some 16 years ago, has always had a penchant for the colorful and the creative. Curiously, he began his career as a system analyst for Bangkok Thai Bank. "Back in the days when I was raised, becoming a doctor or working in public service were considered the right thing to do," the 46-year-old explains. Following the respectable path, he earned degrees in Political Science from Chulalongkorn University and in Organizational Development and Public Relations from the University of Southern California before joining the workforce. But after four years in the conservative banking world, Khun Kookie realized that "my green shoes and whacko ties didn't quite fit in."

It wasn't only green shoes that caught Khun Kookie's fancy, but also tap dance shoes, dancing having been a huge hobby since high school. While crunching numbers at the office in the daytime, in the evenings and on weekends he moonlighted as a tap dance teacher and choreographer for fashion shows, including his longtime friend and designer Nagara. He continued choreographing all types of events – from fashion shows, dance shows and product launches to grand openings, parties and press conferences. He was so successful that he decided to quit his day job and throw himself fulltime into event planning and set up his own company, Kudo.

Leafing through his project portfolio reads more like a who's who of Thailand. It's impossible not to feel overwhelmed: Grand Opening Central World, Bangkok International Summer Fashion Week 2005, APEC Gala dinner for delegates, Citibank Platinum, Thai Supermodel Contest 2002, Product Launch Cartier, Fashion Show Emporio Armani, Ungaro, Kenzo... and these are only in the first few pages. Is there any event he has NOT been involved in, might be the better question.

"I don't like organizing events for tractors, vacuum cleaners or things like that. I prefer luxury goods, fashion, art and culture," Khun Kookie admits.

His love of fashion has led to an important role in promoting Thai design to the world, co-organizing several Bangkok fashion weeks and initiating the 'We Believe in Thai Designers' campaign. "Thailand may

have the reputation for fake Lacoste shirts, but there are a lot of designers with original ideas here and international appeal such as Greyhound, Sretsis, Nagara, Fly Now, Metta and Tube Gallery."

At Elle Fashion Week last month, besides being the brainchild behind the Nagara fashion show, he conceived the much-lauded and lively show for the re-opening of Zen department store. A cross-section of the metropolitan population of Bangkok – young, old, single, married, famous, not-so-famous – strutted down the runway in the different designer brands available at the mega-mall, to loud and enthusiastic cheers from the audience.

Kudo Company currently organizes an average of five events a week. "I don't like to sit still, I'm always on the move," seems to be Khun Kookie's mantra. As an event can require anywhere from 20 to 400 people, another secret behind his success is his team of 28 loyal employees, most of whom have been with him for over a decade, as well as a number of regular freelancers to support him in his often elaborate productions.

One key requirement for taking on an assignment is that the prospective client must share his vision. He loves working with, as he cheerfully phrases it, "hallucinative, imaginative and outrageous ideas. For example, for the opening show of Siam Paragon we hired 400 dancers, things were flying up in the air, we had drums. I love things like that!"

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Of course there's the occasional glitch. "One time a whole stage collapsed before the show and not only did we have to move the entire production, but also a group of 2,000 guests. With the assistance of the military – it happened to be a royal event – and a 'the show must go on' attitude, all was salvaged even if it did mean sort of kicking out members of the University of Agriculture who'd booked the auditorium where the production had to be relocated. I got many grey hairs from that event!"

A great opportunity Khun Kookie feels honored to have been given over the years is serving Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. His first royal assignment, about ten years ago, was creating performances for a banquet in honor of the Emperor and Empress of Japan. Last month he co-organized the Sakhon Nakhon Silk Festival,

an annual event held each November, to promote the use of Thai silk in original designs in order to revive and preserve traditional techniques.

But the singular most important woman in his life was another lady of blue blood, hailing from the Lanna royalty of Northern Thailand: Chao Kokaew, or Princess Koko as she was affectionately known. A fashion icon known for her refined taste, she was a socialite of the highest order, often presiding over ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

"She was a well-educated person, going to finishing schools in Paris and London, very outgoing... She showed me the world, taking me to different countries when I was a child," Khun Kookie reminisces fondly. Hearing him speak about his late mother, who sadly passed

away last year at the age of 70, it's clear she had a profound impact on his life. He shows me the book that he compiled in her commemoration: Princess Koko in her younger years, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Sophia Loren; standing next to an airplane (she was a licensed pilot); and her extensive wardrobe of highly fashionable and avant-garde outfits.

Many remember her later in life for her signature purple hair and her outrageously large rings, forever the extravagant and eccentric fashionista. As a tribute to her, Khun Kookie made the collection of rings she left him into a large necklace, which he regularly wears to festive occasions. "At parties some of her friends have come up to me and said they recognize some of the rings!"



Necklace: Adorned with 58 of his late mother's rings



**"SHE TAUGHT ME HOW TO DRIVE A CAR BUT ALSO HOW TO CONTROL MY LIFE. SHE TAUGHT ME TO READ AND TO ENJOY BOOKS AND ALSO NOT TO JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER. SHE IS THE GREATEST WOMAN AND THE BEST MOTHER."**

From 'A Tribute to Princess Koko'

He says that the biggest lesson his mother taught him is that we're all commoners. She would remind him that, "We might be part of a royal family but that doesn't change anything. We have to work, earn a living and earn the respect of others. I consider myself lucky to have had three things in life: very supportive parents, to be able to do the work that I love, and most importantly, the ability to express myself. I love my life!"

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