



A scene from Spurlock's *Buoi Chieu*, Photo Courtesy of ViFF

Vietnamese Diaspora on Film

The Vietnamese International Film Festival comes to UCLA.

By [Angilee Shah](#)

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What happens when you put Vietnamese ghosts and funky action stars and Buddhist monks together in the same auditorium?

The Vietnamese International Film Festival (ViFF) Day at UCLA is born.

The eight-day long Orange County festival gave its second day to UCLA on Friday, April 8. ViFF is in its second run (the first was in October, 2003) and features full-length and short films by Vietnamese artists from across the diaspora. The theme of the festival this year is "Beyond Boundaries," chosen to highlight the wide variety within Vietnamese culture.

And if the films shown at UCLA Day are any indication, ViFF has indeed brought together a collection of unending diversity.

UCLA Day began with a screening of Charlie Nguyen's feature-length action film, *Hung Vuong the Eighteenth (Thời Hùng Vương 18)*, followed by a question and answer session with the director. (You can see an [interview](#) with Ngyuen in *Asia Pacific Arts*, a bi-weekly magazine of the UCLA Asia Institute. Ngyuen's romantic comedy, *Chances Are*, was screened as a festival preview in March.)

The celebration of film at UCLA continued with a screening of ten shorts by student filmmakers followed by a discussion with the directors. The shorts touch on Vietnamese cultural themes, immigrant experiences, coming-of-age revelations and departures of imagination.

Being part of a community

Buôi Chiêu (Afternoon) is the haunting story about the ghost of the family

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matriarch who returns home to her husband. To call the piece a ghost story would be to underestimate what it actually portrays. It is a film of mixed genres that is both frightening and inspiring, imaginative yet very real. Director Kim Spurlock says that being a part of VIFF gives her chance to share a story that is intensely personal. "I think I need to share the things that happen to me," says Spurlock.

For Spurlock, a graduate student at New York University's film school, the story "creates a good understanding of what my family has been through." She grieved for the passing of her own mother not too long ago but says that creating the film gave her joy.

"The story comes from stories told by my mother about her and her sister's experience with ghosts in Vietnam," Spurlock says. The ghost in the film is played by her mother's sister, who cried while saying her lines near the end of the film, says Spurlock.

Billy-Vu Lam, creator of the animated shorts *Revenge 7.2* and *Destination: Heaven*, says being at a Vietnamese film festival is empowering and inspiring: "It's good to know you're not alone," he says, a sentiment that the other directors echo. Viet Ngyuen, a student at the University of Texas at Austin School of Film says he was the only Vietnamese kid where he grew up, so VIFF gives him a rare opportunity to connect with other Vietnamese Americans pursuing careers in film.

Overcoming challenges

Bringing these films to fruition was no easy task for these student filmmakers. With small budgets and crews, the directors say that they put long hours and devotion into their films.

"We're all the creative types, but everything we talk about is the organization, the money," says director Viet Nguyen (pictured right). He says that filmmaking takes a considerable amount of business-savvy: "The creative part is about ten percent."



His film, *Movie Star*, is a coming-of-age story about a guy who is obsessed with movies. Ngyuen, who also plays the protagonist's friend in the film, says, "That's pretty much an extension of me." The 25-minute film was shot over six days at a cost of \$15,000 -- money that came out of his own savings.

Spurlock says she had five days to shoot *Buôi Chiều*, so she worked twelve to fourteen hours per day. While equipment was free, she paid for film and processing, which costs between \$4,000 and \$5,000.

Billy-Vu Lam says it took about a month to complete each of his two-minute computer-animated shorts. The process is slow because, "Half the time is spent waiting for the computer to render a two-second shot."

John Ngyuen shot his four-minute film, *What's for Dinner, Dear?*, in one day. "We tried to plan as much as we could," Ngyuen says of his fifties infomercial spoof for the infamous Vietnamese hot sauce, Siracha. While the short was made with the help of a grant, Ngyuen spent about \$500, mostly for costumes. "Luckily, Siracha gave us rights for free," Ngyuen adds.



Budget constraints also have an effect on what a filmmaker can and cannot do. Van Pham (pictured left),



director of *A Soul Apart*, says, "You can't beat film," but because the medium is so expensive, "most [student filmmakers] shoot digital."

So in *A Soul Apart*, a violent and beautiful story about a Buddhist monk and a man at a crossroads,

Pham says, "My top priority is the performance of the actors." He is interested most in capturing great moments -- moments like the revelation scene of his film in which the monk shows the protagonist that he too has a violent past. Pham is influenced by dramatic moments in John Woo films and uses freeze frames at pivotal moments to create tension.

ViFF was presented by the Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association (VAALA), an Orange County non-profit that promotes Vietnamese arts, and VietNameese Language & Culture (VNLC), a UCLA student group that promotes Vietnamese culture. UCLA Day was also sponsored by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UCLA.

The remainder of the festival was held from April 14 to 17 at UC Irvine and Regal Cinemas, Garden Grove in Orange County. For more information, visit the ViFF [website](#).

(Photos courtesy of Nick Tang, ViFF.)

[Center for Southeast Asian Studies](#)

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