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MOVIES

## Echoes of war, 30 years later

### Loss and salvation loom large at the Vietnamese International Film Festival, even for those who live outside their ancestral home.

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War trauma marks the hearts and minds of even those born after the war, especially if that war was Vietnam. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, and many of the films in the Vietnamese International Film Festival that takes place this weekend and next are infused with a sense of wistfulness and of melancholy. They evoke an idyllic homeland, they mourn its loss, they commemorate a painful transition to a new home. What is surprising is how young the filmmakers are — many are under 30 and were born outside Vietnam. They seem to have internalized their parents' memories of their native land, as well as their trauma of war and escape.

"My heart beats in a different rhythm," says the narrator in Simon Cuong Phan's meditative short "Mother Vietnam." A kind of tone-poem, the film blends dance, song, documentary footage, personal narrative and text from Buddhist sutra. Having found a good life in America, the filmmaker still aches with homesickness. "My eyes search where the sun sets, beyond the deep restless water. I strain to hear the soft, comforting lullaby from that faraway land."

Continuing through Sunday this weekend and concluding April 14 through 17, the festival has been jointly organized by Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Assn. (VAALA) and Vietnamese Language & Culture. It includes six features, at least half of which ("Buffalo Boy," "Spirits" and "Journey From the Fall") have secured theatrical distributors, and 31 shorts. Screenings take place mostly on the campus of UC Irvine, with one day (today) scheduled at UCLA. Among the highlights are a panel discussion with noted film scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha on Thursday, a symposium on "Cultural Identity in the Arts" on April 16, and a closing program featuring Nghiem-Minh Nguyen-Vo's award-winning "Buffalo Boy" on April 17.

"Cinema is still a new art in our community," says festival co-director Ysa Le, "and we think it needs to be promoted." As a member of VAALA, she recalls that in 2002 they organized a symposium with a panel of Vietnamese directors and actors, which led to the idea of the festival. The first was in 2003, and in light of the still-small stream of films available, they decided to make it a biennial event.

Many of the films do have Vietnamese actors and themes, but Duc Nguyen's "Mediated Reality" is a documentary on Cuba and Thanh Nguyen's "Something Fishy" is an animated fable featuring a beefy white angler.

"The filmmakers are mostly in their 20s," says Le. "The youngest is still in high school." That's Andy Nguyen who made the short "A Silent Night." Several are film school students or recent graduates — Kim Spurlock

("Buoi Chieu") is in New York University's graduate film program, Victor Vu ("Spirits") attended Loyola Marymount University, and Ham Tran ("Journey From the Fall") attended UCLA.

The fest is showing a trailer for Tran's feature film, "Journey From the Fall," an epic about the struggles of a Vietnamese family during the fall of Saigon and their eventual escape to the United States. It is slated for release this month.

Two of the feature films are by older filmmakers, "Deserted Valley" by Pham Nhue Giang and Nguyen-Vo's "Buffalo Boy." Both were shot in Vietnam. "Deserted Valley" tells of two teachers and a principal valiantly trying to make a go of a public school among a tribe of Vietnamese highlanders, whose priorities tend to be farming and early marriage. This is the single feature in the festival actually from Vietnam.

"Buffalo Boy" director Nguyen-Vo grew up in Vietnam but went to France to study engineering, before coming to UCLA to study physics. In a way, he grew up in the movie business — his family owned the only theater in the war-torn coastal village of Vung Tau. "I would sneak in when there was no fighting going on," he says. "It was my escape from the atrocity of the world outside. I just watched people falling in love in 18th century France."

Ten years ago he began taking filmmaking courses at UCLA Extension. When he decided to make a feature, he recalled a collection of short stories by the celebrated writer Son Nam. Two stories stuck in his mind — one about a young man who goes off to herd buffalo and comes back swearing, the other about the difficulties of burial during the wet season — and he melded them into a screenplay.

In 2000 this screenplay attracted the attention of France's Equinoxe Assn., which invited him to a workshop in France. There he met Belgian producer Olivier Dubois. They eventually found co-funding from a French producer and the Vietnamese government.

The dream-like scenery of flooded plains dotted with houses on stilts was carefully sought out by Nguyen-Vo on a scouting trip to the Mekong Delta, near the border with Cambodia. He recruited actors and locals to play the roles, he rented houses from residents "for authenticity." Because key sections of the story take place during the rainy season, his crew shot amid water and downpour, which wreaked havoc on equipment and schedules.

But it had to be done that way, says the director, who is fascinated by the metaphorical implications of water. "In many cultures water is a symbol of life, but here its association is with death and decay," he says. "At the same time the main source of life — rice and fish — comes from the water. These concepts are opposite but inseparable."

Two filmmakers of a younger generation also feel the tug of their roots. Vu, 29, was born in Los Angeles. "I grew up a very Americanized kid," he says. "Later in my life I've gotten more in touch with the Vietnamese part, mostly through these ghost stories," he says. He became enamored of the ghost story tradition through tales told to him by parents and relatives. "I've now realized that they're a way of dealing with a problem or of talking about a loss people can't otherwise."

Set in modern day Vietnam, his feature, "Spirits," is about a struggling writer who encounters two mysterious women. Vu had considered shooting in Vietnam, "but you have to get past censorship, you have to get permits. We felt we had so much more control here." So they rented a large lot in Orange County where they built the house and added the sugar cane field where the story takes place.

Like Vu, Spurlock, 35, who is half Vietnamese, says that making her film, "Buoi Chieu" ("Afternoon"), was a way of getting in touch with her heritage. "I grew up in West Virginia without much exposure to that. My mother didn't mention the war, I didn't learn Vietnamese," she says by telephone from New York. "I felt that part was missing from our lives. I'm trying to learn Vietnamese now, I'm trying to get in touch with that part of our family."

Her short was inspired by a story told to her by her late mother. As children, her mother and her mother's sister would regularly see the ghost of a woman in their courtyard.

"Buoi Chieu" begins with a radio announcement of the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon — it is 1985. Two young sisters live with their mother and elderly grandfather, who hears his dead wife talking to him through the staticky radio. Pretty soon the girls begin to see their grandmother pattering about the house.

During the production, the actress slated to play the grandmother dropped out, and Spurlock begged her mother's sister to come play the part. "There's a scene where she has to lie down next to the grandfather," Spurlock recalls. "Every time she did it, she would burst out crying. It brought back so many memories, the script had so moved everyone in my family. Until then, I didn't realize her sense of loss."

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