

Bringing Vietnamese folklore to the big screen

Friday, March 11, 2005

PARK CITY, Utah — Sisters Kim and Mai Spurlock and their pair of short films added a bit of Vietnamese flavor to the Slamdance Film Festival 2005, an alternative to the better-known Sundance Festival.

“We wanted to bring to life some of the family folklore, stories told by our mothers and our aunts, both about their childhood in Hà Nội and about ghosts,” Kim said. “I also wanted to touch on our generations of family who ran away from Việt Nam and were able to go back before they died. And just about the loss of people who immigrated who felt they couldn’t go back.”

Kim wrote and directed “Afternoon” and “Fish” while Mai produced them.

Both were part of the Gallery Shorts series at Slamdance, where the Spurlocks were the only Vietnamese filmmakers with work in the gathering, according to organizers.

“Afternoon,” translated as Buổi Chiều, is a nearly 10-minute tale that takes place in Việt Nam. The story is told in Vietnamese with English subtitles.

One afternoon, a ghost (Kim and Mai’s aunt, Thôi Stakenborg) visits her family. While two little girls (Julia and Nina Nguyễn) are playing, their grandfather (Ngô Thành Nhân) falls asleep listening to the radio. The girl’s mother (Wendy Chang) checks in on her father periodically and makes sure the children do not disturb him.

Attuned to the make-believe world, the youngsters feel there is someone invisible in the house while the mother carries on with her work. To tell more would be to tell too much.

Kim and Mai were born in the United States, the daughters of a Vietnamese woman who worked in intelligence for South Việt Nam and the American Marine she married.

The two grew up going to some top schools in the United States and abroad. Kim is currently a dean’s fellow in the graduate film program at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Mai studied fine arts and business at Washington & Lee University before receiving her master’s degree in ancient history from St. Andrews.



THAT’S A WRAP: Kim Spurlock wrote and directed the movie “Afternoon,” which had its world premiere at the Slamdance Film Festival 2005 in Utah. Her sister, Mai, served as producer. Photo courtesy of the Spurlocks.

Kim lives in New York; Mai lives in Philadelphia with her husband, Scott Sykes, but plans to move to Los Angeles soon.

During their childhood, they never felt strongly attached to Vietnamese culture though they connected with the roots of the Viet Nam War, which their parents never talked about. “We were just raised with it without thinking about it,” Mai said.

It was only when Kim and Mai started socializing and bonding with other Asians that they started to investigate and explore their identity.

“Now that we’re adults, we’re kind of addressing that in our films. Part of our psyche is American and one is Vietnamese,” Mai said.

The other Spurlock film at Slamdance, the four-minute short, “Fish,” was screened as part of the event’s Anarchy Online Films section at the festival. It is a story about “a man, a boy and a fish,” Kim said. Films like “Afternoon” and “Fish” typically are viewed over the Internet.

For their next project, the pair intends on going “into redneck territory” to tell the story of their father’s side of the family, Mai said.

In the meantime, the two will work together on projects and not worry about any label regarding being Vietnamese filmmakers, or women filmmakers, for that matter.

“I just try to make the best film that I can and reach the people I can,” Kim said. “I’ve been told by equal amount of men and women how much my film has touched them. Maybe down the road it might be an issue.”

“Just getting the audience is the issue now — before we worry about labels,” Mai said.

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