



News and Reviews

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A Dream in Hanoi: A True Story of Love, Stage Fright, and Noodle Soup

>> Directed by Tom Weidlinger. 2002. 91 minutes. In English and Vietnamese with English subtitles.

The subtitle, “Love, stage fright, and noodle soup” hints at the complex and intimate portrait of Vietnamese and American interactions revealed in this film.

Review

Twenty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the Central Dramatic

Company of Vietnam and the Artists Repertory Theater of Portland, Oregon, have joined forces to stage a binational and bilingual production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” for Vietnamese audiences. Filmmaker Tom

Weidlinger was with the production for most of the project, capturing a rich portrait of events as they unfolded, including footage of the frank, and sometimes frustrated end-of-the-day commentary from both the American and the Vietnamese players. Although the film is not without local color—Hanoi traffic, Buddhist



Filmmaker Tom Weidlinger

temples, a mouth-watering Vietnamese meal—“Dream” is less “about Vietnam” than an up close and personal look at what it means to work with the Vietnamese in a Vietnamese setting, negotiating cultural and communication differences to complete a joint project. Weidlinger’s ethnographic presence, an exercise in showing as well as telling, makes this film far superior to some other treatments of young westerners working in Asia. Interview subjects, both foreign and Vietnamese, are not talking heads reciting platitudes; they address the filmmaker as a friend and a confidant who is assumed to understand their situation. The viewer is “backstage” in every sense.

The Oregon troupe arrives in Vietnam filled with good intentions, charmed like many travelers by the city of Hanoi. Because actors from both casts are expected to deliver some lines in each other’s language, the film includes hilarious shots



Above, top: Ngan Hoa as Hermia (left) and Doug Miller as Lysander.

Bottom: Tuan Hai as Puck (center) with his assistants.

of patient language instruction. In one memorable scene, we learn that the Vietnamese are taken aback by the physicality that their American counterparts bring to love scenes. While American actor Doug Miller (Lysander) explores Ngan Hoa’s (Hermia) “comfort level,” the chorus of fairies tells him that Vietnamese performers “aren’t allowed to kiss” on stage and that kissing should be faked with “acting technique.” In the next cut, however, we see that the actors seem to have achieved their own “little revolution” as Ngan races to embrace Miller and share (what certainly looks like) a full on mouth-to-mouth kiss, which is then met with applause from the assembled cast.



Co-producers of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” Do Doan Chau (left) and Lorelle Browning.

The American stage manager (a position that has no Vietnamese equivalent) complains about short workdays and long (two-hour) lunch breaks. In response, the Vietnamese

production assistant explains that while the Americans may be disciplined workers they omit the human side of personal interactions. In contrast, the Vietnamese, he explains, are more inclined to include personal concerns in their work relationships, and their work schedules reflect this difference in philosophy. Another disagreement arises when director Doan Hoang Giang directs actress Kristen Brown to perform the role of Helena as a reticent young woman, which is met with resistance from the outspoken actress who is convinced that the director has a gender

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Asian Educational Media Service

The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) is a program of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. AEMS offers information about where to find audiovisual media resources for teaching and learning about Asia, and advice about which ones may best suit your needs. In addition to *AEMS News and Reviews*, published three times a year, services include a free call-in/write-in service and a website. To add your name to our mailing list, request additional copies of the newsletter to use in workshops or to share with your colleagues, or ask for help in locating resources, please contact us.

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What's New?

Nancy Abelmann, New Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies

It is a pleasure to introduce myself to the AEMS community. I am an anthropologist, Koreanist (but one with East Asia interests at large), and an Asian Americanist. My interests are broad—from social movements to social mobility, and from higher education to media. I have published books on social movements in contemporary South Korea, *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (University of California Press, 1996); on women and social mobility in post-colonial South Korea, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003); and most recently on Korean film with Kathleen McHugh, *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and Nation* (Wayne State University Press, 2005). Currently I am completing *The Intimate University: College and the Korean American Family*, based on four years of transnational ethnography on the educational trajectories of Korean American public college students as they articulate with the educational histories of their émigré parents. I understand anthropology as an investment in social portraiture: as a mode of sketching social life—in all its complexity. It is thus a particular pleasure to find myself directing the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies (EAPS), which houses AEMS with its commitment to media portraiture of Asia.

I am excited about exploring how AEMS can become even better integrated with EAPS and with the University of Illinois at large. I also hope that EAPS programming can feature AEMS more prominently and that where it makes sense EAPS and AEMS can co-program, and together provide educational outreach to the larger community—as we are currently planning for the spring 2006 Korean Film Festival. Further, I envision a partnership in which EAPS and AEMS can serve as national advocates for continued educational media production on Asia. Although AEMS is foremost a national organization—one whose services should enhance teaching about Asia at all levels across the country—I would like to think that the University of Illinois can function as an AEMS laboratory of sorts: a place for pilot programs and for face-to-face encounters that can enrich the AEMS mission. ♦

—Nancy Abelmann



Nancy Abelmann

Hanoi

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“issue,” the American actress is determined to play the role buoyantly—“a little bit over the top.”

As the work progresses, the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding takes its toll. Along with tensions that result from miscommunication and cultural misunderstanding, other serious conflicts also begin to rise. The Portland director, Allen Nause, wonders if Doan sees him as simply doing the leg work, leaving the artistic vision to Doan. Dramaturge Lorelle Browning, whose five-year efforts brought the “Dream” project into being, disputes Doan’s intention to introduce a team of Vietnamese Cheo actors as servants for Puck, a move she considers too “Broadway” and a departure from Shakespeare’s original intent. Even more frustrating for the American company members is the bureaucratic frame in which the play is produced. When the troupe loses their opening venue, the elegant Hanoi Opera House,

they must move to a massive Russian-built structure with only seven days to reconstruct sets, lighting, and blocking. Even more challenging is the prospect of filling the enormous house, a difficulty that is compounded by the censoring committee’s refusal to let the company sell tickets until they themselves have attended and approved the play. In both instances, the Vietnamese knew the bad news well in advance of the Portland troupe but kept the information to themselves in order to avoid confrontation until all the facts and options were known. Predictably, this creates a deep sense of betrayal among their foreign counterparts, but in the end multiple compromises are made on both sides. Nause accepts Doan’s inclusion of the Cheo actors saying that “we can do things the Vietnamese way.” Doan gently but firmly tells the cast to conform to the stage manager’s rigorous schedule in the last days of the production. Producer Do Doan Chau pulls strings to get the authorities’ permission to fill the house with guests on opening night. A respectable crowd shows up

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Rice Rhapsody

>> Directed by Kenneth Bi. 2004. 106 minutes.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARFLIGHT FILMS

Released in Asia in 2004, Kenneth Bi's directorial debut *Rice Rhapsody* was a long-term project that began in 1999 when the script received an Outstanding Screenplay Award from Taiwan's Government Information Office. Even though the film was not a blockbuster success, it secured a number of recognitions including two nominations at the Golden Horse Festival—one of East Asia's most distinguished film festivals—for Best Actress (Sylvia Chang) and Best Original Film Score (Masahiro Kawasaki).

At this juncture of globalization and increasing transnational exchange in economic and cultural spheres, a new trend in border-crossing collaboration has also evolved in the film industry. *Rice Rhapsody* is no doubt a product of this cultural reconfiguration in the East Asian industry. The Singaporean project, jointly produced by the Singapore Film Commission, Ground Glass Images, and the Hong Kong-based Kenbiroli Movies, is distributed by JCE Movies and the Australian company Arflight Films. The film's

transnational background is similarly reflected in its international cast. Bi himself straddles between his Singaporean and Taiwanese identities, while the actors include the renowned Sylvia Chang, a Taiwanese actress who now resides in Hong Kong, Chinese-American TV chef Martin Yan,

Director Kenneth Bi

French actress Melanie Laurent, Hong Kong model Maggie Q, and Singapore model Alvin Chiang, among others.

The film's plot is centered on Jen (Sylvia Chang), who was abandoned by her husband a decade earlier and left to raise three sons by running a Hainanese Chicken Rice restaurant. Jen wishes to see her sons assume the traditional responsibility of continuing the family lineage, so when she finds out that her two older sons Daniel (Alvin Chiang) and Harry (Craig Toh) are



Lepham Tan as Leo and Sylvia Chang as Jen, his mother.

their home, Jen hopes that Leo will discover his heterosexual desires and be different from his older brothers. The plan succeeds in fostering a close bond between Leo and Sabine; however, it is not in the way that Jen had hoped.

Although this homosexual theme runs throughout the film, *Rice Rhapsody* is not so much a story about being gay as it is about a mother's journey to embrace differences. Jen constantly struggles to see past the boundary of values such as filial piety and familial loyalty. Social expectations impair Jen's ability to love her sons for who they are and to recognize herself as someone who is also in need of love and companionship. Hence, when Leo experiences an emotional breakdown upon his best friend's departure for Australia, Jen similarly suffers a spiritual breakdown because her failure to preserve the family lineage signifies the collapse of a support system based

on this set of traditional values. At this point, the film takes on a philosophical twist and Jen learns a new perspective on life through the eyes of Sabine, who introduces Jen to an optimistic notion of life and existence circumscribed by one's intimate relationship with nature and the universe. Instead of defining herself based on a set of old-fashioned dictums, Jen learns to reconceptualize "difference" as a positive and productive category. After all, as a woman who is the head of the family, she is already different. One scene that shows this crucial point in Jen's transformation is when she shows up at her son Harry's birthday party. With encouragement from Sabine, Jen overcomes her homophobic sentiments in order to enjoy herself in the company of gay men, ultimately acknowledging that their difference in gender identity does not make them different from her as human beings.

The film's central conflicts revolve around food, but food also provides the unifying motivation that results in the melodrama's happy resolution. In the opening scene, Jen is seen preparing a sumptuous dinner for her family. This scene foreshadows Jen's fear of losing the tradition of family dinners as she realizes that her two older sons are not interested in maintaining the ritual. What is at stake for Jen is the breakdown of their patriarchal Chinese family, which in this case is ironically governed by a female authority. The fact that the two gay sons are caught up with obligations outside the family calls into question Jen's role as a good wife and mother within the structure. In order to reinforce the patriarchal structure, Jen not only sacrifices Daniel's happiness by forcing him to cancel his widely publicized gay wedding with his French partner for the sake of saving the family's "face," she also suppresses her feelings for her friend Kim Chui as a way to preserve a traditional gender role defined by fidelity. The film closes with a cooking competition between Jen and Leo, which highlights the peak of the tension between mother and son. The resolution comes not from Jen's triumph in the competition but from Leo's appeal for acceptance by tenderly feeding Jen his

new dish called Hainanese Duck Rice. Figuratively, as food sustains life in *Rice Rhapsody*, it also serves as the motif for love and hope.

A conventional narrative film, *Rice Rhapsody* contains few surprises. The film is, however, laudable in its



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Tsunami: The Wave that Shook the World

>> Produced by NOVA. 2005. 56 minutes.

Tsunami: Wave of Destruction

An ABC News Special, December 29, 2004

>> Produced by ABC News. 2005. 52 minutes.

The December 2004 South Asian tsunami was arguably one of the worst global tragedies in modern history. As the first year anniversary just passed, it is an excellent time to revisit what occurred. Despite the tsunami's global impact, there are surprisingly few programs devoted to the event. This review looks at two of the more accessible programs, NOVA's *Tsunami: The Wave that Shook the World* and the ABC News television special *Tsunami: Wave of Destruction*, and discusses their effectiveness for classroom instruction. As a high school chemistry and physics teacher, I was already familiar with scientific explanations of the event, but I was curious to see how the material would be presented in these 60-minute videos. Would I be bored since I had seen so much coverage already? Would I learn anything new? Would I find them useful for my students? These were the questions in my head as I watched these two very different programs.

The NOVA DVD

The NOVA DVD focuses heavily on the science behind the tsunami. It begins by explaining how an earthquake in the Indian Ocean created the deadly December 26, 2004, tsunami. The program uses a timeline to show the sequence of events and the amount of time that elapsed during each stage of the disaster. There are explanations by scientists about the seismic activity that registered at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center and about which indicators may suggest that a tsunami has developed. NOVA's computer animation segments, used to show how an earthquake in the ocean creates a

tsunami and how scientists detect a tsunami, are excellent. From there, the program explores the damage caused by the waves on the various islands in the Pacific and the attempts by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center to gather information and alert other West African countries of the pending danger. Approximately 37 minutes into the program, the focus shifts from the December 2004 South Asian Tsunami to current projects to improve warning systems for the future based on lessons learned from past tsunami events. The video concludes with dire predictions about "the next big one."

The ABC Production

The ABC production, hosted by Charlie Gibson, was originally aired as a television special only days after the tsunami. It focuses on the human tragedy behind the disaster as well as how the world was unprepared for such a catastrophic event. With the amount of sophisticated technology available today, it is almost unfathomable that there was

virtually no warning to neighboring countries after dangerous waves hit the first shores, causing widespread damage. After giving an overall summary of the program in the introduction, Gibson provides lead-in commentaries to each segment. Subjects discussed

include: the grief of the tsunami victims, heroic stories of survival, ongoing relief efforts, among others. There are also bonus features on the DVD

which contain interviews with several world leaders as well as other news segments that were not included in the original broadcast. The program focuses primarily on areas where tsunami damage was most severe—popular resort areas in Thailand, the small coastal city of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, which was very close to the earthquake epicenter, and finally, the devastated island country of Sri Lanka. The program follows the stories of a few survivors from each area, showing what they were doing right before the disaster occurred. As the program seems to contain only footage that was filmed in the first weeks following the disaster, however, the program is only able to estimate the extent of the damage and speculate about secondary diseases that might ultimately kill survivors.

How They Compare

The NOVA video would be most appropriate for high school and college students (i.e. 14 years old or older). Some of the footage may be too disturbing for junior high kids, especially the images of people drowning and dead bodies. This program could definitely be used in geography and physics classes where topics of plate tectonics, earthquakes, and wave behavior/properties are discussed. The classroom activity, available on the NOVA website [see link below], allows instructors to teach students to calculate the wave speed and arrival time of a tsunami and to locate certain geographic locations, but the assignments may not be at a level of difficulty that is appropriate for students in more advanced science classes.

The ABC program also has some very useful discussions on some science topics, including segments on how the tsunami has reshaped the ocean floor topography and how animals receive early warnings in natural disasters. In terms of the human perspective of the 2004 South Asian Tsunami, there is an excellent segment that explores the religious aspect of these kinds of disasters. The program addresses the question, "How do Hindus, Muslims, and Christians deal with and explain disasters in terms of faith?" This is an interesting segment to watch after the more news-oriented first half of the program. Since the tsunami impacted so many Asian countries, cutting

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