

An interview with the writer/director, Tom Zubrycki

Q: What drew you to want to make the film?

When (producer) Kerry Herman showed me the unique footage of the Conservatory in the village filmed during the war I knew that this was an incredibly strong foundation for a film. It was then a process of finding the right people to tell the story. In Vietnam, Kerry introduced me to the Professor (Professor Vu Huong) and his son Anh Tuan. What interested me was how Tuan had started out in the same way as his father, but then had gone in a completely different direction as a musician. Not only was he playing jazz, but he'd become an entertainer as well. This seemed to have upset his father and he was not quite reconciled to how his son had changed. What was fascinating is what this said about modern Vietnam's relationship with the US. The US might have been beaten on the battlefield, but were they winning the cultural wars: the hearts and minds?

The other thing that excited me was how the story of the underground Conservatory was a way of telling the story of how the war was experienced from the North. What happened to the people who lived through the American bombing, and what happened to the next generation? Very few films have looked at this side of the story.

Q: Did you want to make the film straight away?

I did. In fact we got very close to getting it up in 2001. I was in New York in September of that year for meetings with PBS. However after 9/11, broadcasters re-prioritised their pre-sale commissioning and it took us a huge amount of work to find new support.

Q: How is *Vietnam Symphony* different from your other films?

Most of my films, with the exception of my first film *Waterloo* and a film I made in 2000 *The Secret Safari*, are closely-observed narratives. They are driven by key events that happen in the lives of one person or one family. Usually I spend around eight months filming, following events as they unfold – for instance the relationship between Molly and the young Afghan refugee Mobarak in *Molly & Mobarak*. These films are usually very intense and intimate. In *Vietnam Symphony* I wanted to achieve a similar intimacy using interview technique – but this time not with one or two people, but with several.

Q: Were you successful in this? Did it work?

I believe that it did work to a large extent. You're not going to forge the same closeness with the characters as when they're on screen for 80 minutes, but you can still be very affected by their physical presence and their ability to tell a story. During the two research trips Kerry and I made, we found a number of people who would produce this kind of 'performance'. In making our final selection for interview it was important that they complement each other, and I believe this worked out very well. Each person has their own unique way of recalling events and re-telling them. The two women, for example, have completely opposite responses. Mai Phong breaks down and cries, while Tuyet Minh can only recall the amusing and ironic details. Of the men, Professor Huong recounts the events in quite a matter of fact way– as something that needed to be done and was done, while Professor Thanh goes between the extremes of humour and tragedy. His account of being caught-up in the bombing of Hanoi in 1972 is harrowing in the extreme. In total contrast is Thuy Ha, the singer, who delivers her piece with incredible bravado – almost to the point of exaggeration.

Q: What themes and ideas does *Vietnam Symphony* embody?

Vietnam Symphony is a look at Vietnam today through the prism of the past. The historical story of the underground Conservatory is told through a large cast of interviewees, blending archive, interview and music. The key character is Professor Huong – a cellist and his son, also a musician. His son goes against his father's wishes, turning his back on a concert career to work as a quiz show host on television - a relevant metaphor for modern Vietnam and the rapid social changes sweeping the country.

What really interested me were the tensions between the older and younger generations and I wanted to use the music to build and explore the generational change. I also wanted to explore the legacy left by the war. One of the interesting things is how the country's younger generation just wants to get on with the present. Wearing fashion labels and watching pop on TV quiz shows is more important than contemplating a war that for them has little relevance and is long since past. It's ironic how Vietnam – still a one-party socialist state – is flexible enough to absorb a range of influences emanating from its former arch-enemy and still remain true to its ideological roots.

Q: What were the challenges?

The film changes styles as it unfolds. The first half uses an interview-driven style to tell the story of how the Conservatory survived in the village. In the second half the film changes gear and tells the contemporary story in more of an observational style – especially the return to the village. To get the historical to blend into the contemporary I needed to find a meeting point between the two distinct styles. Music was the key to making this work. It was the film's unifying element and an expressive one as well.

In editing the film I was very aware of the tendency of people to romanticise the past. An element of that is inevitable, even expected. However, the variety of stories and the way they are told belies an authenticity that is both genuine and believable.

Q: What earlier documentary experiences shaped *Vietnam Symphony*?

I've made several films where English was not the dominant language spoken - films like *Billal* and to a lesser extent *Homelands* and *The Diplomat*. When I made *Billal*, which is about a Lebanese family dealing with the racism and personal trauma over the near-death of their son, I realised just how much an interpreter could bring to a film – a person who is not only translating for you, but also deeply engaged with the subjects. In *Vietnam Symphony* we had one such person: Dinh Thuy Hang. I met Hang when I was teaching at the University of Technology in Sydney. She was doing an in-service course before going back to her academic job in Hanoi. It turned out that she had gone through very similar experiences in the war as our interviewees. When the US started to bomb the north she was a young girl going to school. Like the other characters in the film she was transported to an evacuation zone – to another village further North. Having had similar experiences made her respected by our characters, and the interviews became very intense heart-felt conversations.