

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

## THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Director-writer Tran Anh Hung was born in 1962 in Da Nang, South Vietnam, and lived there until 1975, when the fall of Saigon led his family to move to France. His early childhood thus coincided with the Vietnam War—which he pointedly avoids by setting his semi-autobiographical first feature *THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA* in 1951-1961, a time of relative tranquility. His central character, the servant Mui (played by two remarkable actresses, Lu Man San at age 10 and Tran Nu Yen-Khe at age 20), was inspired by images “I have of my mother, the freshness and the beauty of my mother’s gestures.” Among those gestures: her work preparing and cooking papayas, the scent of which acted like Proust’s madeleine to initiate for Tran a cascade of memories. In paying tribute to his mother, and in presenting everyday life, Tran aimed to capture his people’s humanity, which he said, “hasn’t been seen at the movies,” to leave the audience with a “calming rhythm that depicts the soul and manner of Vietnamese life.”



That calming rhythm is established through a leisurely pace: the film takes its time and asks us to immerse ourselves in its serenity. Tran and cinematographer Benoît Delhomme utilize long takes, intricate compositions that often involve frames within frames; elaborate camera movements frequently linking interiors and exteriors (which often flow together surrealistically), and delicate interactions between people—especially Mui—and nature. There are dramatic events, but almost all are understated, conveyed elliptically, as in the films of Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu that inspired Tran to become a filmmaker. Tran emphasizes above all sensory impressions: sight (there are long stretches without dialogue, especially in the last half hour), sound (the natural world; diegetic and non-diegetic music), and even—magically—Mui’s experiences with taste, touch, and smell.

Tran planned on filming on location in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), but various factors intervened—the difficulty of finding houses with the architectural features and expansive spaces he envisioned, the lack of a film industry that could provide the camera and sound crew, and the coming monsoon season—and he ended up making the entire film on soundstages in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne. As James King has observed, “this granted Tran far more control over his environment and creates a strange simulacrum-like effect that serves to heighten the sense of this all being a distant memory of a place, rather than a completely accurate representation of it.” But at the same time, there was meticulous attention to realistic detail: the set was populated with reptiles, fish, insects, and plants (notably the papaya trees), creating, in King’s words, “a version of a 1950s Saigon household that is *almost real* yet features enough artificiality to allow Tran to focus in on those specific sensual touches with a level of formal and environmental control that location shooting would never have afforded him.”

*THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA* won the *Caméra d’Or* (awarded for first features) at the 1993 Cannes Festival, and was greeted by uniformly enthusiastic reviews when it opened in the U.S. two weeks later. Janet Maslin (*New York Times*) wrote that the film “marks a luxuriant, visually seductive debut for Tran, whose film is often so wordlessly evocative that it barely needs dialogue. Reaching into the past for its precisely drawn memories, it casts a rich, delicate spell.” Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*) proclaimed, that it is “so placid and filled with sweetness and visual beauty that watching it is like listening to soothing music...like seeing a poem for the eyes...This is a film to cherish.” It went on to become the first (and still the only) Vietnamese film to be Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film, and its success helped Tran to secure funding for two other films about his native country, completing what has become known as his Vietnam Trilogy: *CYCLO* (1995), filmed in Ho Chi Minh City, and *THE VERTICAL RAY OF THE SUN* (2000), filmed in Hanoi.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **TRAN ANH HUNG**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **BENOÎT DELHOMME**  
PRODUCTION DESIGN BY **ALAIN NÈGRE**  
MUSIC BY **TON-THAT TIET**  
PRODUCED BY **LES PRODUCTIONS LAZENNEC**  
(1993), 104 MINS.  
STARRING **TRAN NU YEN-KHE, LU MAN SAN,  
TRUONG THI LOC, NGUYEN ANH HOA, VUONG  
HOA HOI, AND TRAN NGOC TRUNG**

**DID YOU KNOW:** TRAN NU YEN-KHE WAS ALSO BORN IN DA NANG AND MOVED WITH HER FAMILY TO FRANCE AT THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR (SHE WAS ONE YEAR OLD), IS MARRIED TO TRAN, AND HAS APPEARED IN FIVE OF HIS FILMS, INCLUDING *CYCLO* AND *THE VERTICAL RAY OF THE SUN*.

**NEXT UP:** WHAT IS THERE TO SAY ABOUT *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (1939) THAT HASN'T ALREADY BEEN SAID? IF YOU'VE ONLY EVER SEEN THIS TIMELESS CLASSIC ON TV OR HOME VIDEO, YOU'RE IN FOR A TREAT WHEN TREASURES PRESENTS A 35MM PRINT FROM THE FILM'S 1998 RESTORATION AND THEATRICAL RE-RELEASE ON **THURSDAY, JANUARY 26 AT 7 P.M.**