

## Vietnamese-Americans in the VHS Era

Growing up in 1980s Minnesota, there was nowhere my family could go to buy Vietnamese-language films. Our options were to sit through U.S. or European films starring white actors speaking English, or to visit an Asian store downtown that rented out Taiwanese films dubbed in Vietnamese. The Asian video rental was covered with fuzzy brown dust reminiscent of the remains of the pulverized Dracula, reeked of medicinal herbs, and squatted in an indigent urban neighborhood forty minutes from our suburban house, but every week we piled into Dad's old Toyota and blazed a path there, thirsty for movies featuring faces that resembled ours, their mouths moving just slightly out of synch with dialogue in our native tongue. These films were mostly escapist melodramas with contemporary Taipei settings, wherein an ingenue played by Lin Ching-Hsia or Lin Feng-Jiao was thwarted by a devious rival or overbearing mother-in-law in her quest for marital bliss with a heartthrob played by Chin Han or Chin Hsiang-Lin. In these movies, Asian skin was treated as normal, and Asians were portrayed as attractive, worthy subjects of lust and love, performing not for a white gaze but an Asian one. Having watched one of these films once, we were overcome by a profound aching need to watch it again and again. We began copying the movies onto blank videotapes we hoarded in a locked cellar cupboard under two hefty crates of richly aromatic ripening mangos. In no time we had accumulated dozens upon dozens of pirated videotapes piled lengthwise atop other pirated videotapes, their titles scrawled illegibly on labels pasted to their spines such that we often had to play the first few minutes of a film before we remembered which one it was.

~ ~ ~

At the age of eight, I decided I wanted to become a film critic. Up to that point, I had never stepped foot in a movie theater; my family didn't have disposable income to fritter away on the cineplex, and besides, my strict parents had prohibited me from watching contemporary American films, which they believed promoted a crass sexuality, not to mention an anarchically disrespectful attitude toward one's

elders. On top of all that, I didn't have any friends to go to the movies with, anyway. Still, I was undeterred in my artistic ambitions, and every sunshine-embossed summer morning I lovingly unfolded the "Variety" section of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* over my bowl of Crispix and Cheerios, my eyes and brain luxuriating for hours in the heightened dramatic language flourished in the syndicated movie reviews of Siskel and Ebert. My gaze would lasciviously caress the truncated one-sentence synopses of films listed under the heading "IN THEATERS NOW," and I would bring my best deductive skills to bear on guessing how their plots unfurled and what heart-pounding surprises their endings might bring. When a movie ad unrolled on TV — say, as part of a commercial break during *Jeopardy!* or *Wheel of Fortune*, my family's two favorite shows to watch en masse — I would let the tide of operatic background music lift my spirit up, while the gravelly voice-over sensually scraped the drum-tight membranes of my soul.

Around this time, my parents developed an interest in the syndicated *New York Times* crossword puzzle that appeared daily in the *Star Tribune* (usually a week after it first appeared in the *Times*). The crossword always had an odd number of columns and rows — fifteen on weekdays and Saturdays, twenty-one on Sundays. This inconvenient fact made it impossible for my parents to divide the crossword cleanly into two halves, so they developed the following system: my mom would fill in the top eight rows (eleven on Sundays) while watching her midday soap operas, and then my dad would fill in the bottom seven rows (ten on Sundays) after he arrived home from work in the late afternoon. Both being intelligent people who paid close attention to world affairs, they were generally able to pull this off without too much difficulty. There were certain crossword clues that gave them a fair amount of trouble, though: namely, the ones about movies.

To rectify this gap in their knowledge, my dad went to Barnes and Noble one day and came home with a triumphant purchase: *Leonard Matlin's Movie Guide*. This bible-sized tome, over a thousand pages in length, consisted of an alphabetized listing of virtually every movie ever made to date, complete with a short synopsis of each movie and the names of its director and cast. At the back of the book, there was a chronological chart of every film in history to win a major Academy Award. Instantly, I developed a strong attachment to *Leonard Matlin's Movie Guide*, the way normal children become attached to a new pet puppy or beloved baseball glove. I would fall to perusing its pages whenever I had free time in the evenings after my homework was complete. I committed the list of Oscar winners to memory, treating

it with quasi-religious veneration. “Reading the movie book again?” my big sister would ask rhetorically whenever she saw me curled up on the sofa with Leonard Matlin, the expression on her face clearly exhibiting her disdain for my unsophisticated reading tastes. But I was hooked. Never before had I encountered a book that contained such a huge quantity of stories between its covers, narratives stuffed with sex and violence, rebellion and love.

~~~

The first movies I ever saw as a kid were Walt Disney’s *Silly Symphonies*, a series of short animated films that were bundled together in groups of three and sold on VHS cassettes in the bargain bin at Target. The *Symphonies* I found most engrossing, the ones I felt a warm gooey pleasure in rewatching over and over, were the slapstick bits in which some oddly pathos-inspiring villain — say, the Big Bad Wolf in “Three Little Pigs” — gets his comeuppance in an outrageously humiliating yet hilarious way: for instance, by having hundreds of loudly clanging tin cans rain down on him when he makes a foolhardy attempt to breach the pigs’ abode. These short films shaped me into a dour-faced fatalist from the time I was three years old: they taught me the lesson that, in this world, self-styled “good guys” have a tendency to triumph, and people whom society has labeled (perhaps unjustly) as “bad guys” sometimes have no choice but to persist in the face of mortification, perhaps even learn to love their shame. This marked the beginning of my lifelong fascination with shame and the complex ways it can be weaponized, by both majority and minority, bully and victim.

As I grew taller and my attention span longer, I graduated to watching full-length Disney movies, including *Sleeping Beauty* (which terrified me), *Snow White* (which also terrified me), and *Cinderella* (which bored me — I had no patience for insipid milquetoast princesses living in worlds defined by black-and-white moral absolutes; I was far more interested in the psychology of the “wicked” stepsisters and the theology of their predetermined damnation). I don’t recall ever wanting to be a princess as a little girl — I certainly never had a predilection for the color pink, which struck me as either a lethargically watered-down or repressed version of red. Regardless, as an inescapable consequence of being born into 20th-century America, princess stories permeated my childhood universe, until one evening when I was about seven and my mom announced out of the blue that she thought I was

now mature enough to be initiated into the tantalizing world of “grown-up” cinema: i.e., movies starring flesh-and-blood actors rather than animated drawings. That night, wearing an archaic smile like a spiritual version of Vanna White, Mom extended a graceful index finger to flick the “PLAY” button on the living room VCR and showed me the first grown-up film I ever watched: a princess story starring a real-life princess, the 1956 Grace Kelly star vehicle *The Swan*.

*The Swan* may be the most bourgeois, politically conservative movie that exists: it tells the story of a woman born into wealth (Grace Kelly, playing her ice-cold blonde self) who self-denyingly resists the temptations of a love affair with a lower-class man (handsomely dark-haired Louis Jourdan) so that her family’s power and prestige may remain untainted. Kelly’s decision to jilt Jourdan in order to wed a suitably rich dandy is portrayed by the Hollywood filmmakers as a noble sacrifice for a worthy cause, that worthy cause being nothing less than the indefinite perpetuation of the western world’s ironclad power structures. As a seven-year-old, I was not immune to what is fittingly called Hollywood magic: by the time the credits rolled, my face was streaked with sympathetic tears. Even more than that: I spent most of that night sobbing into my pillow, consternated by this cinematic revelation of how the axioms of true love could be so bleakly at odds with the demands of morality. My first exposure to grown-up cinema had resulted in an existential crisis. A couple days later, I overheard my mom holding a whispered conversation with my maternal grandmother on the blue rotary phone in my parents’ bedroom: “I’m afraid that Jenna’s growing up to be too... well, too, *sensitive*,” she said, expressing the worry in Vietnamese except for the word “sensitive,” which she crisply bit out in English.

This all came to pass at about the same time that my once-perfect eyesight began to deteriorate: within months, I went from lording my 20/20 vision over my myopic big sister to seeing the actors in movies as indistinguishable white blurs topped with streaks of yellow or brown plumage. This bodily decline was almost as traumatic an experience for my melodramatic child self as watching *The Swan* was. I did everything in my power to hide it from my parents, my teachers, everyone around me. By this point, I already had plenty of experience concealing the vagaries of my obsessive-compulsive disorder from the world, so it seemed only natural to cloak this new infirmity in elaborate subterfuges as well. One night, my mom angrily summoned me to her bedroom (the spot from which she doled out all her direst punishments) and shouted at me accusingly, “You’re nearsighted!” I shouted back,

“Not on your life!” Mom whipped a book off a nearby surface — it happened to be *Pride and Prejudice* — and laid it open in front of me. “Read,” she ordered icily. “It is a truth universally acknowledged...” I began to recite. I was not convincing enough. The next day, Mom marched me to the optician’s office and had me fitted with my first pair of glasses.

~ ~ ~

In 1993, the year I turned nine, a monumental event happened: a movie called *Mùi du dứa xanh* (translation: *The Scent of Green Papaya*) was released. It was the first Vietnamese-language film ever to be released in the U.S.

In some ways, *Mùi du dứa xanh* is a Vietnamese movie (all the characters are Vietnamese, the setting is Vietnam, and the dialogue is all in Vietnamese). In other ways, it is not a Vietnamese movie (the producers were French, and the entire movie was shot on a soundstage just outside Paris). When you belong to an immigrant family, you have no choice but to learn to be accepting of hybridity, however. Additionally, and more to the point, there was no question that *Mùi du dứa xanh* was the most Vietnamese film ever to be projected on a movie screen across the whole expanse of Minnesota. Therefore, one weekend late in 1993, in a spirit of hushed and reverent solemnity, my parents violated their own deeply entrenched policy of shunning all movie theatres and organized a family outing to go see it.

There was only one movie screen within a two-hour radius of our house on which *Mùi du dứa xanh* was playing: a quirky little arthouse theater on Hennepin Avenue in uptown Minneapolis called the Lagoon. So it happened that early one Saturday afternoon in fall, the four members of my family — my mom, my dad, my sister, and I — filed into the Lagoon just in time for one of the matinee showings. My mom had inscribed the time of the matinee on the wall calendar that hung in our kitchen several days in advance, and we had purposely eaten lunch early that day so as to be sure to arrive in time for the curtain rise. As I walked into the theater, my shirt felt starchy under my armpits, and my footfalls sounded unnaturally loud to my ears: I could just as well have been striding into the Paris Opera House, or the Roman Colosseum.

Two hours later, I felt my mom gently shaking my shoulder. “Wake up, it’s time to leave. The movie’s over.”

I rubbed my eyes. The lights that were going on all over the ceiling were so bright, it hurt to glance up. Without a word, the four of us walked outdoors to where my dad’s trusty Toyota had found refuge in a vermilion splotch of shade.

We were halfway home when Dad finally spoke. “Such a slow-paced movie.”

Mom smilingly agreed, “Yes, it was very boring. So uneventful — nothing like our real lives!”