EXTRAORDINARY MYANMAR!
Burma through the eyes of Burmese filmmakers

The three documentaries and one short fiction film on this DVD are the work of Burmese filmmakers – all graduates of the Yangon Film School. These deeply felt observations of everyday life in a largely unknown country display an astonishing sense of humanity and mastery that belies the constraints under which they were produced.

Portraying Burmese cultural traditions in former capital Yangon (A Million Threads), a maverick artist from Mingun near Mandalay (An Untitled Life), the lives of itinerant workers in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta (Thursday’s Child) and a young doctor caught between tradition and modernity in a Kayin village (The Bamboo Grove), these four works open a hitherto unseen window on the extraordinary lives of ordinary people in Myanmar. They also bear witness to the deep pool of cinematic talent that the Yangon Film School has uncovered.

In the six years since its inception in 2005, the non-profit organisation Yangon Film School has trained over 50 people and produced almost the same number of short films, often for the development sector. The work of YFS filmmakers is now being enthusiastically received at international film festivals and several titles have even aired on Burmese television.

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2011 | 16:9 Anamorphic / 4:3 Letterbox | English Subtitles | DVD PAL | Approx. 63’
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A MILLION THREADS
Director: Thu Thu Shein, Camera: Pe Maung Same and Thu Thu Shein, Editor: Thu Thu Shein, Sound: Lay Thida
Every year on a full moon night in November, thirty women gather at Shwe Phone Pwint Pagoda in the Pazundaung district of Myanmar’s former capital Yangon to take part in a competition known as Matho Thingan. Their task is to weave the finest robes for the temple’s statues of Buddha. All robes must be finished by dawn otherwise they are considered ‘stale’. Cheered on by large crowds and an orchestra of pulsating drums and high-pitched oboes, the teams of dedicated female competitors work the handlooms frenziedly back and forth in a feat that celebrates Buddha’s own foster mother, Gautami, who is said to have woven her son a robe in a single day.
Yangon-born Thu Thu Shein was a video editor at Myanmar Forever June Co. before discovering her passion for documentary at the first Yangon Film School workshop. “I wanted to show the weavers’ excitement, exhaustion and joy”, she says of her directorial debut, A Million Threads, which she also edited. A regular cinematographer on YFS productions, she is currently attending an MA course in cinematography at the Czech Academy of Performing Arts FAMU in Prague.

AN UNTITLED LIFE
Director and Editor: Shin Daewee, Camera: Thaiddhi, Sound Recordist: Hnin Ei Hlaing
The painter Rahula lives a modest but contented existence with his family in Mingun, a village on the banks of the Ayeyarwaddy 11km upriver from Mandalay. In his studio next door to the towering base of Mingun’s famously unfinished brick pagoda, he works on a new painting and we learn how this easy-going artist has managed to survive a sizable chunk of Myanmar’s chequered history. Sawing the air with his cheroot, the jovial Rahula also reveals how he acquired his unusual name, his now successful painterly style, and met his supportive wife, of whom he admits: “If it weren’t for her I’d still be painting pictures of monks and pagodas for the tourists.”
Shin Daewee began her film career as an assistant producer at AV Media. Since joining YFS in 2006 she has created a number of films about the impact that integrated development projects spearheaded by local and international NGOs are having on the people of Myanmar. Besides this portrait of the painter Rahula, her own documentaries include Robe and On Holiday (both 2011). She is currently working on a film about Myanmar’s recent election entitled The Collector.

THURSDAY’S CHILD
Director/Cinematographer: Tay Zar Win Tun, Sound Recordist: Kyaw Myo Lwin, Editor: Khin Khin Hsu
Every year, Than Htay and his extended family travel across the Ayeyarwaddy Delta from their village in Zalun to find work in Pyla Pone. A tender portrait of a family of itinerant field workers, suffused by the sounds and rhythms of the delta. Yangon-born Tay Zar Win Tun first encountered documentary films in Japan where he spent four years working for an electronics company. Since joining YFS in 2007 he has worked on a string of documentaries, including the long-term observational Rice – Towards a Better Future and Water Boy which screened at international film festivals in Berlin and Sydney. His current projects include a documentary film about the controversial Myitsone dam project entitled The River.

THE BAMBOO GROVE
Director: Khin Khin Hsu, Screenwriter: Aung Min, Cinematographer: Mya Darli Aung, Sound Recordist: Kyaw Myo Lwin, Producer: Shin Daewee, Editor: Hnin Ei Hlaing
A naïve young city doctor’s first job out of medical school is as GP to a rural Kayin community in the Delta. Visiting his patients by boat, the Doctor comes into conflict with traditional Kayin ideas about medicine in the form of U Kee Yo, an old man determined to remain in his beloved bamboo grove. The story is inspired by screenwriter Aung Min’s own experiences as a doctor amongst the Kayin people in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.
This is Khin Khin Hsu’s first film as a director after she trained as cinematographer during a YFS Beginners’ Workshop and proved herself to be a talented and sensitive editor on the warmly observational Thursday’s Child. She grew up in a film environment and perhaps inherited her filmmaking talent from her father, the well-known Burmese editor U Ohn Maung. She has just begun a four-year scholarship to train in directing at the Czech Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.