

Annual Report 2007

Yangon Film School
Non-profit Association for the Promotion
of Young Burmese Film and Video Artists



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Annual Report**I. Summary of Activities in 2007**

Building on the success of previous workshops mounted in Yangon in Myanmar in 2005 and 2006, during which a core group of 15 young men and women received basic training in documentary filmmaking and editing respectively, in 2007 the Yangon Film School mounted **three** workshops in order to:

- a) provide 12 new participants with basic skills to make, in teams of 3–4, their first own short documentaries inspired by the topic of “Children and Young People in Myanmar” in a workshop entitled **The Art of Documentary Filmmaking – Beginners**;
- b) provide 12 participants of previous workshops with specialised training in cinematography and lighting, sound recording and mixing, treatment writing and directing, and editing during a workshop entitled **The Art of Documentary Filmmaking – Stage Two**;
- c) provide 8–10 participants with basic training in **The Art of Screenwriting** (fiction)

1. Breakdown of Activities

December 2006–September 2007

During this period Project Organiser Lindsey Merrison was involved in fundraising, pre-workshop organisation including devising of courses, sourcing of participants, tutors and staff, workshop permit application, coordination of travel arrangements, research and purchase of equipment and teaching materials, cash flow and fund management.

April 2007: Project launch in Yangon by the Project Organiser in April 2007 in order to:

1. Source course candidates;
2. Hire a YFS Project Director to conduct advocacy work, negotiate company registration for YFS, as well as prepare the permit application for the workshop (submitted in July 2007);

August 2007: Research trip undertaken by the Project Organiser to Yangon to:

1. Conduct further interviews with course candidates;
2. Finalise participants for all three workshops;
3. Monitor the progress of the permit application;
4. Present the work of YFS to INGOs, local NGOs and aid agencies for acquisition purposes.

October–December 2007: Pre-workshop preparation in Yangon followed by three workshops.

December 2007–April 2008: Post-production of the 15 films produced during the workshops (subtitling, colour correction, sound mix, edit of workshop films, production of the new double-DVD, cover design, inlay text), preparation of financial and narrative reports, audit.

2. Comments

Fundraising and Scheduling

Initially, the three 2007 workshops were planned to take place separately, in May and October 2008. Although fundraising commenced in December

2006, the project was not fully funded until August 2007. The YFS's primary donors in 2007 included the Heinrich Boell Foundation and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (via the Institute of Documentary Film in Prague), with smaller contributions from the Goethe Institute Jakarta and the Finnish Media Foundation, VIKES. Since much of this funding had to be spent in 2007, all three workshops were mounted back to back, from 1.11. - 10.12.07, with the two-week Screenwriting Workshop running parallel to the Stage Two workshop. This proved to be an exhausting experience for the Project Organiser in particular, who was responsible at one point for the well-being of over 40 people and spent several weeks working 15-hour days.

Implementation

A workshop permit application was submitted in July 2007. As a result of the political unrest in September, there was considerable doubt as to whether the workshops could take place at all. Undaunted, the Project Organiser travelled to Yangon in advance of the workshops to assess the situation and gauge the possibility of mounting the trainings. Acting as individuals, three members of the YFS had filmed some material during the demonstrations for archive purposes and subsequently went into hiding for several weeks; another member (who did not film) was arrested for one week and subsequently released. The atmosphere in Yangon after the crackdown was subdued. NGOs were very cautious and maintained a low profile. As a precaution, the Project Organiser decided to postpone the workshops by one week. The full complement of YFS equipment was not retrieved from a number of safe locations until the end of the first workshop. This, plus the fact that several Stage Two crews needed equipment to film several NGO films, made it necessary to juggle available equipment during most of the Beginners' Workshop.

These logistical problems notwithstanding, all three workshops were carried out without incident between 1.11.2007 - 10.12.2008, with the scheduled number of tutors and participants (including those that had come out of hiding) and according to the submitted project outline.

Permits

Although written approval was not forthcoming prior to the workshops, the Yangon Film School was nevertheless given a verbal go ahead by its new, enthusiastic and supportive local partner, U Myint Thein Pe, who is President of the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation. An ex-cinematographer and film aficionado, U Myint Thein Pe had been instrumental in liaising with the Ministry throughout the submission process; he also furnished the Stage Two crews working on the collaborative YFS project, "Yangon by Night" with a Letter of Support to enable them to film at a number of locations in the city.

Ministry Approval for 2008

On the last day of the workshops, the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation received a letter (see annex) from the Ministry of Information in response to the workshop permit application. In this letter, the Minister invites the Project Organiser to mount workshops in Yangon in 2008. This is the first time since the inception of the YFS workshops in 2005 that the Minister has acknowledged and furnished written approval of our activities. This letter marks an important step towards being able to found a permanent media centre.

Company Registration, Licences

Another way to be able to operate regular courses involving foreign mentors is to found a company. In spite of the continued efforts of YFS Project Director Zin Myo Sett, approval of the **Company Registration** for Yangon Film Services and Productions, the local company run by members of the YFS Group, was delayed and, finally, postponed. This came about as a result of new procedures regarding the founding of companies with media links that had suddenly been introduced in the wake of the unrest. The members of the YFS Group are now obliged to begin a new application, which may take up to a year or more.

On a positive note, in February 2008, the YFS Group was successful in obtaining a **Filming and Production Licence** which will help YFS members to legitimate their filming and research activities. A further licence, this time for editing, is currently being processed.

The Art of Documentary Filmmaking – Beginners

1.11. – 21.11.07

**A three-week Workshop in Yangon, Myanmar
mounted by the Yangon Film School**



Participants of the 2007 Art of Documentary Filmmaking Beginners Workshop

1. Participants

A total of 12 young Burmese people – six women and six men – from various backgrounds and ethnic groups aged between 22 and 39 took part in the **Art of Documentary Filmmaking Beginners Workshop 2007**. Of these participants, three had taken part in the 2006 YFS workshop, The Art of Documentary Editing. Seven of the participants had some previous media experience, having worked as editors (Ko Nwai, Hnin Ei Hlaing, Kyaw Myo) journalists (Thiha Thwe) or photojournalists (Tayzar Win Tun, who had worked in Japan and whose family owns a chain of photographic shops in Yangon); two participants joined the workshop from the NGOs Population Services International (Ko Nwai) and ActionAid/Shalom (Dashi Thura). Dashi, who is a member of the Jaing Phaw ethnic group, had no previous filmmaking experience whatsoever. Wai Mar is an assistant art teacher at a private school, Thaidhi's father is a well-known songwriter, and Mae Htoo Cho is attending the University of Culture's new cinema course. Shin Daewe, a former AV Media employee who made the film "The Uninvited Guest" for PSI during the 2006 workshop, joined the Beginners Course for the first week before leaving to film her NGO assignment "Beyond the Tsunami" that was completed during the Stage Two workshop.

2. Tutors and Other Staff

The tutor group comprised British-born Lindsey Merrison (Directing and Treatment Writing), German cinematographer and director Lars Barthel, Czech sound engineer Ivan Horak, Australian editors Melanie Sandford and Stewart Young, British editor George Cragg and German editors Jessica Ehlebracht and Hanka Knipper.

As with every workshop, a core group of 7–8 dedicated translators were an instrumental part of the team. The success of the workshops is to a certain extent dependent upon the linguistic abilities and cultural finesse of these skilled interpreters, who helped to overcome the language barrier that continues to prove a challenge to teaching at every level. In addition, transcribing and translating dialogue, and subsequently helping to create English-language subtitles for the finished films is a major task. In 2007 it took four translators working full-time for over half the six weeks of the workshops to complete this work.

The Project Organiser was supported by Project Assistant **Lena Zimmer**, an anthropology graduate and filmmaker, as well as a local cashier, **Ei Ei Than**. These assistants provided invaluable administrative assistance prior to, during and after the workshops.

The tireless efforts of Workshop Manager **Nay Lin Zin** insured not only the smooth-running of the workshops' catering and logistical aspects, he also helped to provide locations and even found time to appear in two of the participants' filming exercises (*Changing a Tyre, Salad Days*).



Australian editing tutor Stewart Young mentoring the crew that made *A Piece of Eden*

3. First week

As with the 2005 beginners course, the 2007 training also comprised a mixture of classroom teaching, film exercises, screenings and discussions, culminating in the production of four final film assignments on the topic of "Children and Young People in Myanmar". Made in teams of three in consultation with mentors from the tutor group, these ten-minute portraits were edited in collaboration with the editing tutors.

The course began with an **Introduction to Documentary** including basic training and screenings of different examples of documentaries (The witty yet humane Latvian documentary portrait *The Egg Lady* remains a popular introduction to the genre). Other screenings included films by Russian filmmaker Viktor Kossakovsky, Nicolas Humbert and Werner Penzel's cinematic poem *Middle of the Moment* and YFS filmmaker Lay Thida's *Just a Boy*.

Topics covered during classroom sessions included the many ways in which documentary can be defined; the crucial quest for underlying truths, how a documentary filmmaker needs to have a sense of critical inquiry that is non-journalistic, and is often required to find an artistic way of filming the real.

Initial exercises such as "Ways of Seeing", during which a woman was filmed performing certain tasks in a room by camera-and-sound teams, enabled tutors to find out which participants gravitated towards cinematography, directing or sound recording. On Day 4, which was devoted to interview technique, participants were asked in teams of four (camera, sound, director and protagonist) to take turns interviewing each other.



Days 5 and 6 saw three-person crews (selected by the tutors) filming short portraits of staff members working at the Princess Hotel where the workshop was held. These were subsequently edited by the tutors and appear as “More Stories from the Princess Hotel” on the 2007 DVD.

Evenings were reserved for screenings and discussions of participants’ filming exercises.

Comments

The tutor group, which met regularly to discuss the progress of individual students, was surprised to note that the new group of participants seemed – at least at the outset – less cine-literate and less possessed of an instinctual eye for filmmaking than those trained in 2005. During discussions however, these participants were far more vocal than the earlier group of students and had no qualms about analysing each others’ work. Discussions of films and raw material soon became lively debates that engendered useful discussions about ethics, teamwork and the function of documentary.

4. Second and Third Weeks

During the second week, the tutor group put the participants into four three-person teams for the filming of their final assignments on the topic of “Children and Young People in Myanmar”.

Classroom teaching concentrated on how to identify a subject and a protagonist, as well as the importance of thorough research and a well-written treatment in the process of creating a documentary portrait. The necessity for a productive relationship between team members and the responsibilities of each individual within the crew were also discussed. While directors went out to various locations to find their protagonists and write their treatments, camera-and-sound crews were taken through their paces (literally during travelling shots) with tutors for Cinematography and Sound.

Mentors and editors were assigned to each team from the tutor group, but, although mentors helped guide teams through the production process, they did not accompany teams to locations.



Beginners' Workshop participants learn how to walk backwards and film at the same time

After each day's filming, material shot by each team was screened to the whole group and discussed. Rushes were digitalised into edit suites and the basics of the post-production process were explained. (Final Cut Pro edit suite tuition and the topic of editing itself requires a separate workshop and is not taught during Beginners Workshops). With some mentoring from Stewart Young, one of the participants, Aung Nway Htway, was able to edit his own film, *A Piece of Eden*,

The third and final week of the Beginners' Workshop was devoted to completing the edits of the four final assignments. Once again, rough cuts were screened and discussed by the entire group. On Day 16, the participants of the Stage Two workshop moved into the hotel workshop venue (some had returned to Yangon having filmed their documentary assignments for NGOs during the week) and at the end of the Beginners' Workshop, Beginners, Stage Two participants and tutors came together for a boat trip followed by dinner at a restaurant to celebrate the end of the first workshop.

Public Screening of Beginners' Films

A few days after the end of the Beginners' Workshop, the YFS held a screening during which three of the four final films made by the beginners: *Water Boy*, *Piece of Mind* and *Happy Days* were screened to an audience of representatives of development organisations (World Concern, Yinthway, Metta Development and Shalom Foundations, IDE) and cultural institutions (Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation, British Council, Alliance Française).



The protagonist of the film *Happy Days*

Comments

As with previous workshops, participants once again exhibited sensitivity, perspicacity and diligence during all stages of the filming process – in spite of a notoriously difficult subject. Perhaps thinking of the advice that some of the most interesting subjects are those to be found on your own doorstep, director of the film *Happy Days* Wai Mar decided to portray her irrepressibly ebullient 13-year-old next-door neighbour. In *Water Boy* Tay Zar Win Tun explored the life of a 13-year-old worker at the mineral water factory of which he is co-owner. Angered to learn during a filmed interview of the

maltreatment of his young employee, Tay Zar got up – the camera still rolling – to admonish, and fire off–screen, the aggressive factory manager. Ko Nwai, who had previously only ever worked as an editor, displayed considerable ability as a sensitive interviewer in his film *A Piece of Eden* about how a 12–year–old boy suffering from muscular dystrophy finds support and friendship at a remarkable centre for the disabled run by an NGO in Yangon’s Insein township.

Finally, in his portrait of a young boy working on a farm ‘Far from Home’ in Hmawbi north of Yangon, Thi Ha, who is a stringer for Japanese broadcaster NHK, learned the hard way that the interview methods he had acquired working as a journalist can be counter–productive in documentary. Screening of the rushes for this film sparked off a valuable debate among tutors and participants alike about the politics of interviewing children, and how important it is to avoid victimisation and voyeurism.



First time director Thi Ha with the protagonist of his film *Far from Home*

The Art of Documentary Filmmaking – Stage Two

18.11. – 10.12.07

**A Three-Week Workshop in Yangon, Myanmar
mounted by the Yangon Film School**



Participants of the 2007 Art of Documentary Filmmaking Stage Two Workshop

1. Participants

There were a total of 15 participants aged between 22–39 in the **Art of Documentary Filmmaking – Stage Two Workshop**. Six of these participants – Wai Mar, Darli, Hnin Ei Hlaing, Thaidhhi, Ko Nwai and Kyaw Myo – had shown such promise during the Beginners’ Workshop that the Project Director decided to give them an opportunity to continue their training straight away. Nine of this workshop’s participants – Pe Maung Same, Thu Thu Shein, Kyi Phyu Shin, Aung Ko Ko, Myo Min Khin, Lay Thida, Shin Daewe, Tin Win Naing and The Maw Naing – have been regular students of the YFS since its inception in 2005, the Stage Two workshop marked their third YFS course. Cinematography student Ko Yoe attended the lighting course for one week before returning to his permanent job at the NGO PSI.

2. First Week

The Stage Two course kicked off its specialised training with a series of lighting cinematography and sound exercises aimed at helping students to adapt to filming in a variety of conditions requiring the use of lighting or more complex sound set-ups. Led by cinematography tutor Lars Barthel and sound tutor Ivan Horak, these exercises included a variety of situations, such as the filming of a traditional Burmese *hsaing waing* orchestra, dancers and singers on the roof of the hotel; an elderly cheroot-smoking lady in the hotel basement, and a woman sewing at night by a single neon light in her house built of teak. These exercises were viewed and analysed by the whole group.

Group project ‘Yangon by Night’

In a series of tutorials with the whole Stage Two group, the students developed the idea (inspired by the screening of legendary British documentarian Humphrey Jennings’ 1944 masterpiece *Listen to Britain*) for a portmanteau film – *Yangon by Night*. This film involves several crews and locations but, like Jennings’ work, does not include interviews; the film’s controlling idea is the notion of Myanmar’s former capital as a place of – often bleak – contrasts. Myo Min Khin was appointed the project’s artistic director–editor, and Aung Ko Ko its lighting director.



Stage Two participants during a lighting exercise

Stage Twos' NGO Projects

Having begun to forge links with INGOs and local NGOs during 2006, in 2007, several YFS filmmakers – Lay Thida, Kyi Phyu Shin, Shin Daewe and Pe Maung Same – and their crews were commissioned by NGOs Metta Development Foundation and International Development Foundation (IDE) to document their work in locations as far-flung as Kachin State, southern Shan State and the Ayeyarwaddy Delta. The topics depicted in these 20-minute documentaries ranged from the story of an ex-poppy farmer (*A Farmer's Tale*); a successful pig-breeding project run by a group of resourceful women in a Shan village in *The Merry Widows of Nam Mun Village*; the way in which a treadle pump has turned around the fortunes of a man and his family in *Stepping Up*, to post-tsunami relief in Laputta (*Beyond the Tsunami*).

During the first week of the Stage Two workshop these projects, that had been filmed prior to the workshop, were digitalized into edit suites and transcribed. Always a challenging aspect of YFS workshops, the translation of dialogue into English and the creation of subtitles for international audiences

this time proved even more complex than usual since one of these projects (*A Farmer's Tale*) required translating first from Pa-O into Burmese, and subsequently into English. All films (except one) were edited by participants during the three-week workshop, with the assistance of mentors from the tutor group.

One group of participants formed a crew to research another NGO film project about a nursery school *Blossom* founded by a dedicated Kachin woman. The film's director, Wai Mar, identified a young protagonist in the shape of a four-year-old boy attending the school who has lived with his aunt since the death of his virus-positive mother. Fraught with difficult issues, such as the boy's own diagnosis (unknown at the time of filming), this film proved to be too challenging a work to complete during the workshop, and is currently a work-in-progress.

3. Second and Third Weeks

During the second and third weeks of the Stage Two course, filming continued on the *Yangon by Night* project. Locations included a fish market, a night club, ferry boats collecting passengers bound for Dala on the other side of Rangoon River, a group of young men playing football on the wide, deserted streets in the early hours of the morning, people sitting in curbside eateries in downtown Yangon, a midwife visiting a woman about to give birth, an internet café, two children busking on a dark empty street, and a crowded street festival. Some locations (a monastery next door to a police station) proved too difficult to film without arousing the suspicion of the authorities and had to be abandoned; students felt more at ease once they were in possession of a letter of support from the President of the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation legitimising their activities.

Rough cuts and later fine cuts of the NGO projects made by YFS filmmakers were screened and discussed with the whole group. Tutors and participants were impressed by the way in which the makers of these documentaries had succeeded in subtly promoting the NGO's work and in creating compelling, often humorous portraits of individuals from all over Myanmar.

Sound tutor Ivan Horak spent the second and third weeks of the Stage Two working with several students on **mixing and sound design** of the Beginners' films and NGO projects. Setting up a mini recording studio in his room, Ivan began to teach participants how to work with Burmese musicians playing traditional instruments in order to create improvised pieces to accompany specific sequences in the workshop films.

Directing tutor Lindsey Merrison also taught students how to write and submit **documentary treatments** to international broadcasters.

Screenings of world cinema were held throughout the Stage Two workshop, whenever the schedule allowed. Films shown included cinematography tutor Lars Barthel's own award-winning *My Death, Not Yours*, Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh's impressive *S21*, Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon*, British filmmaker Kim Longhinotto's fabulous *Sisters in Law*, and *Aber wenn man so leben will, wie ich...* a film made in 1988 by students of the Konrad Wolf Film School in Potsdam-Babelsberg about a young punk rocker's quest for individuality in spite of the constraints of living under the GDR regime. Once again, these screenings provided valuable opportunities to broaden the horizons of participants and it is gratifying to watch students begin to discuss and debate documentaries in terms of form and content.

Public Screening of Stage Twos' NGO Films

On the penultimate day of the Stage Two Workshop, the YFS screened another film from the Beginners' Workshop, *Far From Home*, and a Stage Two NGO film made for Metta Development Foundation, *The Merry Widows of Nam Mun Village* – to an audience of representatives of development organisations, embassies and cultural institutions (including the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation).

During the workshop, participants drew up **inventories of all YFS equipment** as well as the DVDs, videos and books of the **YFS Film Archive** and labelled each item before moving everything to the newly rented **YFS House**.



YFS filmmaker Kyi Phyu Shin and her crew filming one of the protagonists of the NGO film *The Merry Widows of Nam Mun Village*

4. Comments

The Stage Two course was a moveable feast, during which students found themselves sometimes torn between joining lighting and sound workshops, identifying and filming at locations for the group project *Yangon by Night*, or working on NGO projects that – as commissions – had to be finished by a certain date. In future YFS has decided to edit and post-produce NGO films outside workshops. Residential trainings should be devoted instead to the students' further exploration of the art of film rather than meeting clients' deadlines.

In addition, those students filming at night were often too tired to attend some of the daytime screenings and lectures. This will be rectified in future by having teaching modules that can be repeated throughout the course so that all participants can attend at times appropriate to their individual schedules.

Cooperation with NGOs continues to enable YFS participants to gain valuable experience in learning how to manage projects, film autonomously in the field, work to deadlines and fulfill clients' briefs; it also provides crews with an invaluable insight into local level change and – not least – a source of income as filmmakers.



Lay Thida (with hat on right) and her crew filming *A Farmer's Tale* in Shan State

This year's workshops saw YFS continue its cooperation with the INGO **Population Services International (PSI)** by training one of this organisation's in-house videographers and one staff editor; the school also trained one of **ActionAid** and **Shalom Foundation's Reflect** fellows during the Beginners' Workshop.

The Art of Screenwriting

22.11. - 9.12.07

**A Two-Week Workshop in Yangon, Myanmar
mounted by the Yangon Film School**



Participants of the YFS Screenwriting Course 2007 with tutor Rachel Mathews (centre)

1. The Participants

Before the course began YFS Director Lindsey Merrison scouted Yangon for writers interested in learning the discipline of screenwriting. Through a mixture of contacts, word of mouth and discussion with the Myanmar Motion Picture Association, she drew together a group of nine participants of diverse ages and backgrounds. The oldest, Aung Min, is in his 40s. A medical doctor by profession, he ran a clinic early each morning before attending class. Aung Min has long nursed an interest in writing and has had a number of short stories published, as well as writing art reviews for Myanmar newspapers. His nearest compatriot in age and outlook was Lin Tin Oo, a well-known poet in Myanmar who has produced a beautifully illustrated book of poems. Then there was The Maw Naing, a performance artist whose art has been reviewed by Dr Aung; Ei Yupar Win, a young woman of many talents, not least among them being crowned Miss Myanmar 2007; May Htoo Cho, who had already co-written a feature film screenplay; computer animators and editors Thet Ko Ko and Ye' Min Htaik; film and English students Su Su Thain Win and Saw Yu Mon.



Saw Yu Mon, Su Su Thaing Win & May Htoo Cho

2. The Course

The 13-day screenwriting course was designed to take participants through each step in the creation of a short (10-15 minute) film script. The intention was not only to have them write a good script within the class, but also to give them the tools in order to create their own screenplays - short and long - in the future. We began by exploring the differences between prose and script. I asked each student to write a brief account of a memorable experience in prose and convert this description into a scene from a screenplay. Myanmar's recent past came into play here with one participant writing a vivid account of



experiences during the 'Saffron Revolution'. Our translator was concerned about translating such an account, which hit home the everyday hurdles Burmese writers must negotiate in order to express themselves. Teaching via a translator was a new experience for me and the students and there were some initial feelings of mistrust about the translator, his agenda and his ability to translate accurately the students' ideas and writing. However, working with the same translator each day, such issues were overcome and, by the course's end the translator was a key member of the team with many students inviting him to play parts in the reading of their scripts.

Exploring the differences between prose and script led the students to a clear understanding of how a scriptwriter must think with their eyes and tell stories primarily through images. I then asked each student to create a character about whom they would like to write. The diverse nature of the

Pictured above: screenwriters Lin Tin Oo & Aung Min



Translator Lay Maung & Tutor Rachel Mathews

group led to a diverse set of characters and stories, ranging from a young boy fighting against the constraints of becoming a Buddhist novice to a retired school-teacher who dearly wants to go to his favourite pupil's wedding, but cannot allow himself because he has misplaced the golden shirt-studs required for his wedding outfit. There was a teenage girl nursing dreams of becoming a film star; a young man trapped in ennui and self-loathing who resorts to self-harm; a little girl troubled by her relationship with her bullying older brother and a computer programmer who, Pygmalion-like, creates a dream woman who steps out of the computer screen and starts causing havoc in the real world. Two stories revolved around ideas of chance and magic realism: one about a young woman who believes her life will be ruined when she loses her lucky pair of jeans; the other a love story involving an antique-dealer, an artist and a tribal artefact which may or may not be cursed. After thoroughly developing these characters, we concentrated on their stories. I introduced the concept of the '3-Act Structure' to the students, a structural device which forms the cornerstone of most Western films.



However, we also discussed other ways of structuring screen-stories and debated the differences between Eastern and Western approaches to storytelling (which turned out not to be as great as we initially assumed). Buddhism became an important factor here. Many Western films are based around a protagonist with an overwhelming desire to achieve something – an object, a person, etc. These stories are predicated upon conflict as other characters and/or circumstances stand in the protagonist’s way. For a Buddhist, struggle like this is not of such

importance. As Lin Tin Oo said, ‘life is like a bubble in water’ i.e. all striving amounts to nought. It was interesting trying to square the Western concept of the questing protagonist with the Buddhist mantra of acceptance. I brought something new to the students, but they also brought something new to me.

3. Screenings

The course was delivered as a series of morning classes. I screened and discussed short films during these sessions but the main focus was on the students writing and developing their scripts. The afternoons were given over to the screening of a feature film, followed by a discussion of this film. The films ranged from Hitchcock’s ‘Rear Window’ to Wim Wender’s ‘Paris, Texas’; because we had animators in the group, I screened the children’s animation ‘The Iron Giant’ (based on a short story by Ted Hughes) whose anti-violence message created ripples around the room. We watched Peter Weir’s ‘Witness’ and Nicholas Roeg’s ‘Don’t Look Now’. I didn’t realise the extent to which students can get hold of black market DVDs of Hollywood movies. Many of

Pictured above: Thet Ko Ko & Yé Min Htaik

them had seen films like 'The Matrix', 'Transformers' and the 'Speed' and 'Spiderman' franchises. What Myanmar cineastes find harder to experience is World Cinema, the kinds of films which create a buzz at film festivals but are not pirated onto DVD. I will return to Yangon with a suitcase full of World Cinema classics. I would also like to introduce the students to older radical filmmakers such as Buñuel, the French New Wave and, in keeping with the philosophy of documentary fostered on other YFS courses, the films of practitioners like the Dardenne brothers.

4. Final Script-Reading

The course culminated in a reading of the scripts to an audience of YFS students, friends, family and other tutors. This was the first time many of the participants had had the experience of hearing their work in front of an audience and the event brought this successful and enjoyable course to a rewarding close. The students came away from the 13 days with a well-developed first draft of a short film script and a sound understanding of the techniques essential to becoming a screenwriter.



Students & audience at the final script-reading

5. Future Plans



A good script needs a little time to be developed. Now the students have had some space to digest the teachings of the course and to gain some objective distance on their work, I will deliver feedback via email on their first draft scripts with suggestions for how to develop their stories further. YFS is conscious that, whilst learning the techniques of screenwriting can be rewarding in itself, a script is only the blueprint for a subsequent piece of work: a fully realised film. The next step in this training of screenwriters will be for the students to see some of their work produced. To this end YFS plans to

hold a script competition to select two scripts which can be made into short films at a subsequent YFS workshop.

The short films will be made with crews formed from participants of other YFS workshops, using trained camera, sound, production and editing talent. This short-film making course will also give YFS the opportunity to train a group of directors in fiction film-making.

**Rachel Mathews,
YFS Screenwriting Tutor
Berlin, January 2008**

5. Direct Results of YFS Workshops in 2007

1. Films and Screenplays

In 2007, YFS participants produced:

- 7 film exercises;
- 4 ten-minute documentaries on the topic of 'Children and Young People in Myanmar'
- 4 20-minute films for NGOs as clients
- 9 short drama screenplays

The above films, as well as three short films about the workshops themselves including comments from both participants and tutors, are available on this year's double DVD: "Stories from Myanmar, films made by students of the Yangon Film School in 2007"

2. Benefits for Target Group

- Unique opportunity to live and work alongside tutors from all over the world in a relaxed but structured atmosphere in which cultural barriers melt.
- Participants acquire solid media skills that are becoming increasingly desirable in a growing marketplace – at home and abroad.
- Positive psychological effects as participants acquire a deeper understanding of their immediate environment, the world at large and themselves.

3. Dissemination of YFS Films

The first YFS productions to be shown at an international festival were Kyi Phyu Shin's portrait of a young nun, *Peace of Mind* and The Maw Naing's poetic reflection on the women working at a glass factory in Yangon ... *again and again*. Both were screened at the American Anthropological Association's / Society for Visual Anthropology Festival in Washington D.C. in November 2007. Winner of the Heinrich Boell Foundation's Documentary Award 2007, *A Million Threads*, by Thu Thu Shein, will receive its world premiere at the Visions du Réel Documentary Film Festival at Nyon in Switzerland in April 2008.

To have come thus far with a group of student filmmakers, many of whom had never heard of the term documentary before, and some of whom had never held a camera in their lives is remarkable. It bears testimony to the wealth of talent in Myanmar, just waiting to be inspired.

Myanmar Television

The YFS is particularly pleased that two of the school's films – *A Day with Aye Nan Lin* and *Peace of Mind* – have recently passed the Burmese censorship process and are scheduled to air on MRTV4 in 2008. In a climate notoriously hostile to independent media, this is a significant achievement. We are hopeful that other YFS productions will soon follow suit and that MRTV4 and MRTV3 will become a regular showcase for the work of these young documentarians.

Trip to the Berlin Film Festival

In February 2008, six of the YFS' filmmakers were invited – courtesy of the Heinrich Boell Foundation – to Berlin to take part in the Berlinale's Talent Campus. Among the many highlights of this marvellous opportunity was the encounter between the Burmese filmmakers and their counterparts from other, no less troubled countries. YFS Director Lindsey Merrison also organised meetings between YFS filmmakers and potential partners such as broadcaster ZDF (Das kleine Fernsehspiel) and the World Cinema Fund, during which some of the YFS' films were screened and discussed.

6. Conclusion and the Next Step

1. Future workshops

Each workshop that the YFS is able to mount successfully to its *own* specifications inside Myanmar brings the project closer to its goal of a permanent media centre, with major benefits for an entire generation of cineastes.

The success of the YFS' recent paying film assignments from local NGOs and INGOs bodes well for the project's planned sustainability. As of March 2008, a further six documentaries, commissioned by NGOs Alliance Francois Xavier

Bagnoud, World Concern and IDE, as well another for the British Embassy, are currently in various stages of development and production.

However, certain logistical problems have arisen that need to be addressed to ensure that students will, in time, be in a position to train others and run the YFS media and production centre themselves. For this reason, course modules in 2008 should include

- Production
- Post-Production
- Sound design and mixing
- Subtitling

However, the YFS must respond to the needs of the YFS students not only as producers of commissioned films but also as emergent filmmakers in their own right. For this reason, projects for clients will no longer be developed, filmed and edited during residential workshops, but rather mentored throughout the year – either virtually via email, or in the flesh in the case of ‘flying mentors’ who are present for short periods in Yangon.

As of 2008, workshops will place more emphasis on teaching, analysis and experimentation. In 2008, the focus will be on the topic “Different Ways of Telling a Story”. The aim will be to encourage YFS students to explore their own quest as filmmakers, and develop their own artistic forms – be it documentary or a mixture of documentary and fiction – in which to interpret the complexities of human existence.

2. YFS House

The YFS is expanding. The previous base at Pearl Condominium was too small (and too loud) to store and maintain equipment, film archive and serve as a post-production house. The new premises in Mayangone township are larger, lighter and more conducive to the YFS’s multifarious activities including editing and screenings. There is also a reliable supply of electricity (the YFS has also installed a stabiliser to regulate current to the edit suites). Three YFS members, including Project Director Lay Thida and Equipment Manager Thu Thu Shein, are permanently based at the house.

3. Funding

At present, the YFS is funded by a number of multi-lateral sponsors on a project-by-project basis. As the Yangon Film School moves towards its goal of setting up a permanent media centre, YFS would benefit from regular funding in order to implement its diverse activities.

Steady sources of funding would help in the following ways:

- Enable the YFS Director to plan the workshop schedule including permits in good time;



YFS has rented a spacious house in Mayangone Township in Yangon

- Allow the YFS Director to continue to forge links with more INGOs and other organisations, thus securing a livelihood for YFS filmmakers;
- Rent the YFS house as a base for several years to come;
- Provide YFS filmmakers with bursaries to research and develop their own projects;

- Enable YFS Director to advertise and interview new candidates for YFS workshops from a larger number of other ethnic backgrounds (providing travel grants to short-listed candidates);
- Plan more than one workshop per year;
- Fund flying mentors to oversee projects in Yangon in between workshops;
- Employ the local YFS Project Director, Project Assistant and Equipment Manager;
- Employ a Berlin-based Project Assistant to coordinate fund-raising, project management, accounting;
- Employ translators and native speakers to create English-language subtitles for YFS films, and Burmese subtitles for some of the films in the YFS Film Archive;
- Employ a Publicity Officer to continue to distribute YFS films to international film festivals and art galleries and establish links with film schools and broadcasters.

Lindsey Merrison
Director
Yangon Film School
Berlin, March 2008