

Annual Report

2008

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



	Page
Contents	
I Summary of Activities in 2008	3
1. Breakdown of Activities	4-5
2. Comments	5
(i) Fundraising	5
(ii) Schedule	6
(ii) Permits and Implementation	6
(iv) Company registration, licences	6
II The 'True Fictions' Workshop 17.11–13.12.07	7
1. Introduction, Students, Tutors	8
2. Week One - initial training	8-10
3. Week Two & Three	10
(i) Script	10-11
(ii) Pre-production	11
(iii) The Shoot	12-13
(iv) The Directors	13-15
5. Week Four – Two Films, Four Cuts	15-16
(i) Completion of films	16
(ii) Music	16-17
6. Workshop Outcomes	17
(i) The Films	17
(ii) Western vs. Burmese sensibilities	17-18
(iii) Benefits for students	19-21
7. Summary of Achievements of True Fictions	21-22
III Beginners Workshop	22-23
IV Treatment Writing and Pitching Course	23-24
V Beginners Editing Workshop	24-25
VI Sound Design	25-26
VII Screenwriting and Pitching Course	27-29
(i) Rationale	27
(ii) Writers	28
(iii) Workshop	28-29
(iv) Future screenwriting plans	29
VIII Annual YFS Screening	30

	Contents	Page
IX	Direct Results of Yangon Film School in 2008	30
	(i) Visible outcomes	30-31
	(ii) Benefits for target group	31
	(iii) Dissemination of YFS films	31-32
	(a) Commissioned Projects for NGOs	31-32
	(b) Independent Projects by YFS Filmmakers	32
	(c) YFS Films at International Film Festivals	33
	(d) Myanmar Television, YFS Crews	33
	(e) Study Trips Abroad, Exchanges	33-34
X	Conclusion and Next Step	34
	(i) Workshops in 2009	34
	(ii) Flying Mentorships	35

Annual Report

I Summary of Activities in 2008

In 2008 the Yangon Film School entered its fourth year. The broad range of the school's activities in 2008 reflects the project's growth and consolidation as a media resource in Myanmar as well as its ability to respond to the diverse needs of the students and the local environment. In 2008, the Yangon Film School:

- a) Cooperated in February 2008 with the Heinrich Boell Foundation to invite six YFS students to Berlin as observers at the **Berlinale's Talent Campus** programme;
- b) Commenced, in April 2008, in cooperation with the Heinrich Boell Foundation, the **YFS 'Flying Mentorship' programme**, during which Editing Tutor Regina Bärtschi led a workshop, held at the YFS house, on the topic of **"Different Ways of Telling a Story"** and acted as editing mentor on three new YFS projects filmed for NGOs;
- c) On 28.04.08 sent, in cooperation with the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Cinematography and Directing Mentor Ulrike Schaz to Yangon as a 'Flying Mentor' and to continue the workshop topic **"Different Ways of Telling a Story"**. Ulrike's workshop had barely begun when, on May 2, southern Myanmar was hit by tropical cyclone Nargis. However, her presence proved invaluable when the YFS students began to organise their own relief trips to the delta and began collecting material for a film

on the psycho-social aftermath of the country's most devastating natural – and man-made – disaster.

For its fourth outing at the end of 2008, the Yangon Film School Workshops curriculum was expanded to include:

- d) An exciting new four-week documentary-fiction hybrid course entitled **'True Fictions'**. Led by British screenwriter and director, Rachel Mathews with support from eight other experienced tutors from around the world, the purpose of this course was to encourage 18 second and third-year YFS students to work with non-actors to tell fictional stories which, in visual terms, are nonetheless firmly grounded in documentary.
- e) A **Beginners Workshop** which provided two new students with an introduction to the Art of Documentary Filmmaking and the opportunity to work on their own short documentary portrait.
- f) Two four-day courses on **Screenwriting** and **Documentary Treatment Writing** led by Rachel Mathews and Lindsey Merrison respectively, during which 14 screenwriters and six students of documentary learned how to identify subjects and ideas, create synopses and pitch their ideas to the rest of the YFS group.
- g) A two-week **Sound Design Course** and one-week **Post-production Course** led by Czech sound tutor Ivan Horak and German editor Jessica Ehlebracht respectively, during which six students learned to work with musicians, prepare sound mixes, and fine-tune the True Fiction films and documentaries made during the 2008 workshops.
- h) A three-week **Beginners Editing Course** during which two YFS documentary students – Wai Mar Nyunt and Shin Daewe – were introduced to editing by Finnish editing tutor Tuula Mehtonen and Australian editing tutor Melanie Sandford and learned how to shape their own documentary films, both of which had been filmed prior to the workshops.

1. Breakdown of Project Director's Activities
January 2008 - March 2009
During this period Project Director Lindsey Merrison undertook the following:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Preparation of financial and narrative reports and grant writing ○ Other fundraising activities including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding mission to London (FCO) in August - Funding mission to Copenhagen (International Media Support, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in September - Visibility actions including screenings of YFS work to potential

clients, festival organisers, media workers, NGOs, donors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pre-workshop organisation including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Devising of courses - Sourcing and selection of participants, tutors and staff - Workshop permit applications - Coordination of travel arrangements - Research and purchase of equipment and teaching materials - Cash flow and fund management ○ Year-round mentoring of individual projects for NGOs as well as individual films by YFS students ○ Year-round mentoring of YFS students in all organisational and contractual aspects of running the YFS premises as a media resource ○ Establishing contact between YFS students and international broadcasters in order to pave the way for co-productions – in particular for the post-Nargis project.
5 – 13 July 2007:
Research trip undertaken by the Project Organiser to Yangon to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Present the workshop outline to members of the YFS Group ○ Conduct individual interviews with course candidates ○ Finalise participants for all workshops and courses ○ Monitor the progress of the permit application ○ Present the work of YFS to INGOs, local NGOs and aid agencies for acquisition purposes ○ Mentor ongoing NGO commissioned projects
November 5 - December 19, 2008:
Pre-workshop preparation in Yangon followed by workshops.
December 2008 - April 2009:
Post-production of the 10 films produced during the course of 2008 and workshops (subtitling, colour correction, sound mix, edit of workshop film, production of two DVDs, cover design, inlay text), preparation of financial and narrative reports, audit.

2. Comments

(i) Fundraising

In 2008 funding once again proved to be an issue for YFS. In spite of the Project Director having commenced fundraising as early as September 2007, the project was not fully funded when the workshops began in November 2008. Technical requirements and human resources were under-budgeted. But for the support, at the eleventh hour, of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, it would not have been possible to mount the YFS workshops as scheduled. One reason for the touch and go funding of the project in 2008 was a significantly reduced contribution from DFID UK as a result of policy changes in the aftermath of Nargis. Another was an initially positive, but finally unsuccessful funding application to Danida via the Danish Embassy in Bangkok.

In 2008 the YFS's other donors included the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (via the Institute of Documentary Film in Prague), the Goethe Institute Jakarta, the Heinrich Boell and the Finnish Media Foundation, VIKES. Since much of this funding had to be spent in 2007, workshops were mounted consecutively, or rather, parallel to each other, from 17.11. to 19.12.2008.

(ii) Schedule

The year 2008 saw the introduction of an entirely new course element – the documentary-fiction hybrid – which necessitated a complete overhaul of previous approaches to scheduling, and involved an elaborate web of rotating tasks for students and tutors alike. The programming of the True Fictions workshop in particular was a complex and painstaking task requiring several months of discussions between tutors and course participants. However, this careful preparation bore fruit since the final schedule – though necessarily compact – gave many of the students an opportunity to familiarise themselves with several different roles during the production of a feature film in a documentary setting.

(iii) Permits and Implementation

In 2008 the Yangon Film School (YFS) film workshops took place for the first time with an official written permit from the Ministry of Information (see Appendix I). YFS continues to maintain constructive links with the Myanmar authorities and cooperation with the Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation (MMPO), headed by ex-cinematographer U Myint Thein Pe, once again proved productive.

Permits are still a time-consuming, sensitive area but each workshop serves to strengthen our position. A process of friendly, but firm negotiation has enabled the Project Director to continue to appoint all participants personally, although this will no doubt remain an issue for future workshops. In 2008, we conducted a separate 10-day introductory course on documentary filmmaking for two 'new' participants – Han Linn Aung, who works for Myanmar's only film laboratory and who was asked by the Ministry of Information to file reports on his experiences, and Su Su Win Hlaing, who had taken part in our Screenwriting Workshop in 2007. Both of these candidates were suggested to us by MMPO and both proved to be very adept students. Without exception it has been possible to interview each potential candidate – regardless of their ethnic, political or social background – and accept only those who display a genuine aptitude for filmmaking.

(iv) Company Registration, Licences

As a result of a tightening of regulations in the wake of the Saffron Revolution in September 2007, the members of the YFS Group were obliged to begin again their company registration application. Since the founding of companies with media links remains a sensitive area, it is difficult to say how much longer this

process will take. The students estimate that the registration – under the new company name of Yangon Film Support – may be in their hands by mid-2009.

The YFS Group is still in possession of licences issued by local authorities for filming, production and editing that help to legitimise their filming activities.

II 'TRUE FICTIONS'

A four-week docufiction workshop mounted in Yangon, Myanmar by the Yangon Film School from 16.11. – 13.12.08



Participants of the Yangon Film School Workshops in 2008

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2008 'True Fictions' workshop was designed to give YFS students already trained in the art of documentary filmmaking the chance to learn and develop some of the key skills required to make a fiction film. Building on the strong documentary ethos of YFS training and filmmaking to date, this workshop focused on the intriguing junction between reality and fiction. This meant the students were asked to make films from a pre-written script but using real locations and casts made exclusively of non-actors 'playing' roles very similar to their everyday lives. In order for the students to understand this concept – which is very different from the usual type of fiction filmmaking practised in Myanmar – we

first introduced them to the work of another 'true fiction' practitioner, the celebrated Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, concentrating on two films from his 'Koker Trilogy': *Where is the Friend's Home?* and *Through the Olive Trees*. Once the students had gained further experience of the 'True Fictions' philosophy on a practical basis, shooting exercises from one of Kiarostami's films, they progressed to the main task of the workshop: to shoot two versions of *Like A Bubble In Water*, a short script written by a YFS screenwriting student on 2007's Art of Screenwriting workshop. Finally, YFS trained editors cut four versions of the resulting footage, resulting in four filmed versions of the initial script.

The Students

The workshop participants consisted of 18 YFS students, nine women and nine men, and a mix from the 2007 Advanced and Beginners Workshops. Split into two teams – A and B – each team had the same number of Advanced and Beginners with the intention – which the workshop satisfactorily fulfilled – that the more experienced students would act as trainers and mentors for the less experienced. Each team was allotted a student producer to oversee the production process from the Week 1 exercises, through the shoot in Weeks 2 and 3 to the Week 4 edit. The remaining students shared roles in their teams of director, assistant director, cinematographer, camera assistant, sound recordist, boom operator, production assistant and clapper/loader.

The Tutors

The students were mentored throughout the process by tutors from across Europe with a broad range of experience in filmmaking and the teaching of film. YFS director and British-born documentary filmmaker **Lindsey Merrison** was workshop leader and introduced the concept of 'True Fictions'. Danish director-producer **Mette-Ann Scheperlen** and German production manager **Helke Madry** oversaw the workshop's production aspects; British writer and director **Rachel Mathews** mentored the areas of script development and directing; German cinematographer **Lars Barthel** took care of the camera department; Czech sound recordist and engineer **Ivan Horak** was production and post-production sound mentor and German editor **Jessica Ehlebracht** mentored all four versions of the films as they were edited. Editing workshop tutors **Melanie Sandford** from Australia and **Tuula Mehtonen** from Finland joined nightly screenings of rushes to add their informed comments to those of the rest of the tutor group.

2. WEEK 1 – Initial Training

The first week of the month long workshop concentrated on introducing the philosophy behind 'True Fictions'. After an initial screening and discussion of Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home?*, tutors from the key specialities – production, directing, camera and sound – were given a morning each to ana-

lyse the film from the point of view of their speciality, screening clips and discussing important elements in order to clarify the ethos of the workshop and the important factors the students needed to consider when approaching a 'cross-over' documentary-fiction type of filmmaking. The afternoons were taken up with more practical training, with the students split into groups to focus on production, direction, camera and sound.

Towards the end of the week, philosophy and practice came together when the students were divided into two production teams (of nine people each) and given three scenes to film as an exercise. The scenes were taken from Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* and were chosen because each one focused on a different skill: Scene 1 demanded quite complex co-ordination and camera movement as a servant hands out tea to a film crew; Scene 2 was a static scene involving a long speech from one of the characters and enabled the students to practice working on dialogue with non-actors; Scene 3 required a dramatic dialogue between a young man and an old woman to be shot on the move. The students were not shown how Kiarostami approached these scenes before they themselves shot them; instead, Kiarostami's work was screened after the students had filmed and edited their own versions, and the different versions were screened side by side for comparison.



Working with nonprofessionals was a challenging and rewarding experience for YFS filmmakers

The ability to screen Kiarostami's versions alongside those of the workshop participants proved an extremely useful teaching tool, with the students being able to contrast their own choices of location, shots, camera angles, placement and choreography of actors, etc, with those of Kiarostami. There was the potential for this to be rather a disheartening experience but in fact, the opposite proved to

be the case: the most notable outcome of the exercise was the realisation that there is no 'right' way to shoot a scene. Each director, actor and film-crew brings something different and unique to the process. The students also received a clear illustration that in filmmaking, less is often more i.e. the more simply a scene is shot and the less it is cut, the more powerful the effect can be. The students tended to over-edit their scenes, using a wide variety of shots and angles, whereas a filmmaker of Kiarostami's experience allowed shots to run at length, often shooting the scenes in a single shot.

As well as allowing the students to practice the ethos of 'true fiction' filmmaking, this preliminary exercise also enabled them to start working in teams (the same two teams were retained throughout the workshop) and to gain an understanding of what is required when casting non-actors and searching for real locations.

3. WEEKS 2 & 3 – One Script, Two Films

Week 2 plunged the students into the most challenging task of the workshop, to shoot a short (10-15 minute) fiction film complying with the 'True Fictions' philosophy of using non-actors and real locations.

i) The script

The script *Like A Bubble In Water*, written by Linn Ti Oo, (pictured right) a writer and poet of some renown in Yangon, was chosen by the workshop leaders for two main reasons. Firstly, from an aesthetic point of view, it was vividly written and was deemed to be an authentically Burmese story, focusing as it does on a man's struggle to find meaning in his life via the teachings of Buddhism. The script tells the story of U Ohn Thwin, a retired schoolteacher whose wife has recently died. His son is living far away and does not have the time nor money to visit his father. U Ohn Thwin is lonely but seeks solace at the pagoda. Change enters his life in the form of an Ex-Pupil who invites U Ohn Thwin to his wedding. The old school teacher agrees to attend and sets off into the streets of Yangon to buy a wedding present in a bookshop and have his hair cut at a street-side barbers. But when U Ohn Thwin is dressing for the wedding he comes across photographs of his wife from his own wedding day. Filled with grief, he does not attend the wedding after all. The final scene shows him returning to the pagoda.



Secondly, from a practical point of view, the script featured a relatively small number of characters – U Ohn Thwin, his Ex-Pupil, a Buddhist monk, a barber and a shopkeeper – and locations. Since the students would have very little time

to cast the project and find places where they could shoot, we chose a script that was as contained as possible.

The students began by reading the script and discussing it with Linn Ti Oo. This led to a lengthy and lively debate. Part of the attraction of the script to western readers was its ambiguity. It raises intriguing questions about whether Buddhism is in fact a solace or the opposite, with a hint that teachings such as the famous phrase alluded to in the script's title – that life is as insignificant and brief as a bubble in water – might actually be life-denying. Some students understood this ambiguity but others missed it or were actively opposed to it (this was particularly the case amongst those whose own Buddhist faith was strong). There was a general feeling that the script needed to be clearer, with some complicated business about the gold shirt-studs U Ohn Thwin seeks to wear for the wedding in particular need of clarification. There was also discussion about the script's structure, in particular the writer's use of flashbacks. Ultimately production Team A chose to dispense with the flashbacks altogether whereas production Team B retained them. Both teams requested that the writer simplify the script's structure and make the dialogue more idiomatic.

ii) Pre-Production

As the writer was sent away to undertake rewrites, the two teams embarked on an intense three days of pre-production, searching for (non)actors and locations. There was a healthy element of rivalry in this, with each team seeking to outdo the other in their hunt for suitable people and places. Team A struck lucky early on, finding a friend of a friend who had actually been a school-teacher and who seemed made for the part of U Ohn Thwin. Team B struggled, but eventually found a man whose rather stiff and upright bearing confirmed he had also once been a teacher. As the week progressed the importance of casting became more and more apparent. Team A's protagonist immediately lit up the screen; Team B's was less obviously engaging. However, as was discovered in the comparison of the exercise scenes filmed by the students and by Kiarostami in Week 1, ultimately there was no 'right' or 'wrong' way of performing this role; the two were just different. This is where the true value of filming two versions (and cutting four) of the same script lay: comparisons could be made at every point in the process and students from each team learnt valuable lessons not only from their own actions but also by witnessing the strengths and weaknesses of those carried out by the other group.

Finding locations in such a short time was a challenge. The students had the advantage of an intimate knowledge of Yangon. But shooting anywhere in Myanmar is tricky and they were understandably nervous of choosing places in the public eye (so the barber-shop and bookshop proved to be particularly difficult). There was also another major issue which, as westerners, we had disregarded when selecting the script: Buddhism forbids monks from doing anything other

than being monks. This prescription extends to filming and abbots of the pagodas were understandably even more opposed to the idea of filming after they and their monks had born the brunt of the crackdown following the so-called 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007. Here the 'True Fictions' ethos came to the students' aid as they could explain to the abbots that the monk in the script would be filmed being a monk and nothing more, saying words a monk would naturally say in his day-to-day contact with laymen. It was touch and go for a couple of days, but eventually both groups found abbots who were willing to allow one of their monks and their pagoda to be filmed.



A pre-production meeting with Danish tutor Mette-Ann Scheperlen

During the pre-production period the production mentors gave the students given the role of producer a crash-course in production, going over scheduling, location management, transportation, catering and, most important and challenging of all, budgeting. Both teams were allotted what was deemed to be a respectable budget of 250,000 kyats (around \$250). Although this was explained to be an equivalent to the kind of budget student filmmakers in the West could expect, both teams considered this sum to be far too small. Issues were also raised about the necessity of asking people to sign release forms before acting or allowing their property to be used in the filming, with such a legalistic concept being at odds with Myanmar etiquette.

iii) The Shoot

The teams were given six days in total to shoot what was estimated to be a ten minute script (the finished versions range from ten to seventeen in length). Matters were complicated by the mentors' decision to give each student two roles;

one for the first three shooting days, another for the second (with the exception of the producers: each team had a single producer). So, for example, a director for shooting days 1-3 would become a production assistant for shooting days 4-6; a camera person in the first block of shooting would become a boom operator in the second, and so on. The logic behind such swapping was to give as many people as possible experience of as many roles so, rather than for example just training two directors during the workshop, we would train four. In hindsight, such swapping was perhaps a challenge too far. Team B valiantly followed the mentors' instructions, with the whole production team swapping around after three days. Team A elected to stick with their initial roles.

The shoot was also made potentially more difficult by the inability for the mentors to accompany the students to location. It would draw too much attention from the authorities – and lead to a possible shutdown of the shoots (or worse) – for westerners to be seen in the company of Burmese people with cameras in the streets of Yangon. Ultimately, however, this proved to be a boon rather than otherwise. The students became much more independent by being left to their own devices on the shoot, celebrating their own triumphs and being forced to resolve their own problems. Both teams and the mentors reconvened each evening to watch the rushes of the footage shot that day. Although instructions were given for the students, who were filming on digital video (Mini DV), to shoot at a filming ratio of 10:1 (i.e. 10 minutes of raw footage for every 1 minute of finished film), this maxim quickly fell by the wayside and the rushes' screenings became something of a marathon as we all watched an hour or more of footage each evening. The nadir was hit when watching 15 minutes of a single long-shot of a not particularly inspiring Yangon street, until it was discovered that this apparently aimless filming was the result of the director being called away by the local authorities, and the camera being accidentally left running while he was asked to explain himself. Again, the 'True Fictions' concept proved to be helpful in this case: when the authorities heard the students were filming a fiction film rather than a documentary, they were allowed to proceed.

iv) The Directors

Out of the four students selected to participate as directors in the workshop, Kyi Phyu Shin had the most experience, coming from a filmmaking background and having already directed around six Burmese feature films (indeed, she combined the True Fictions course with shooting pick-ups for her latest movie); Tay Zar also had experience of commercial filmmaking; Thi Ha comes from a journalistic background and Ko Zin Myoe Sett, a former tour-guide, had the least experience. The four directors were chosen primarily because they had stated their case most strongly for wanting to be directors when the idea and full schedule of the 'True Fictions' workshop was introduced and discussed with all the students in Yangon in August 2008. Since the role of director is frequently the most

coveted, particularly in fiction filmmaking, there was some discussion amongst the rest of the group about the suitability of the four students chosen. A group meeting was held and it was explained that, whilst these students were being given the chance to direct for this particular workshop, the mentors were very



open to the idea of other students taking on this role in future projects – something which a pitching session at the end of the workshop confirmed may well happen.

Perhaps because of the pressure of the other students expecting her to be an expert on the film-set, Kyi Phyu Shin* struggled both with the concept of 'True Fictions' and with dealing with her crew and, most of all, her actors. The workshop was a steep learning curve for her. Whether she will transfer the very different skills and techniques learnt at the crossover of documentary and fiction into her feature

filmmaking work remains to be seen. Tay Zar also struggled to align his notions of what fiction filmmaking is with the 'True Fictions' philosophy and, during his allotted days of directing, turned up on set not only with track and a camera dolly but also a quite large crane. Much time was spent preparing and filming tracking shots which never made it to the final cut. The crane, however, although frowned upon by at least one tutor during the shoot (for introducing too much artifice), makes for a beautiful final shot in both versions of Team B's film.

In Team A, Thi Ha was the director who embraced this kind of filmmaking most enthusiastically; he succeeded in forming a strong rapport with his protagonist which shows clearly on screen. He and Ko Zin Myoe Sett, also from Team A, benefited from a producer – Pe Maung Same – and cinematographer – Aung Ko Ko – who have considerable camera experience from previous YFS documentaries and were determined to make an aesthetically arresting film. It is interesting to note that Team A shot the most stunning footage and – assisted by a winning performance from their well-chosen lead – seemed to be the strongest team

*Kyi Phyu Shin is pictured left holding the clapperboard as Shin Daewe (directing) lines up a shot with DOP Thu Thu Shein and camera operator May Htoo Cho.

during the nightly rushes' viewing. However, much of their footage – though beautiful – would not cut together and many of the most impressive images though beautiful, ended up on the metaphorical cutting room floor. Like the tortoise and the hare, Team B, whose protagonist came across as stiff and unengaging during the rushes, shot a film whose true merits only appeared in the edit. Perhaps because both Kyi Phyu Shin and Tay Zar have experience of feature filmmaking (although Tay Zar had not previously directed), their shots at least cut together, even if they failed to build the kind of rapport with their protagonist the two less-experienced directors in Team A enjoyed with their lead.



Ko Zin Myo Sett (at table) setting up a shot with lighting cinematographer Aung Ko Ko (standing on right)

5. WEEK 4 – Two Films, Four Cuts

After the long days and quite frenzied atmosphere of the shoot, the workshop became calmer and more contemplative as both teams moved into the edit. Two editors and two assistant editors were appointed to each team (four editors per team, eight editors in total) to cut two different versions of the shot footage, resulting in four different films. The directors were encouraged to participate in the edit – a director can learn as much from a few hours of seeing how beautiful shots do not necessarily cut together, as they can from many days on set. This led to some confrontations before the hierarchy of the edit room was established. In the edit the director may be boss, but the editor is in control. Ideally, the work will be collaborative but the director must learn to respect the editor's opinions, in the same way that the editor must endeavour to try out the direc-

tor's suggestions. Jessica, the editing mentor, had her work cut out, smoothing ruffled feathers and calming disputes at the same time as she hurried from one edit room to the next, overseeing the four different projects.

It is worth noting that one student, May Htoo Cho, although not appointed as an editor, was so keen to develop her editing skills that she undertook to cut her team's footage (Team B) by herself, in down-time when an edit suite was free. Although not as practised as the other editors – Team B benefited from having Lay Thida and Ko Nwai, two advanced students who are quite competent editors – May Htoo Cho did a credible job. Her endeavours have been rewarded by the decision of the mentors to invite her to cut one of the YFS's NGO projects in early 2009.

Rough cuts were screened to the members of both teams and mentors in the evenings. Once again the benefits of making more than one version of the same material became very clear. The ability to compare different editing decisions taken regarding the same footage was invaluable. Editing tutors can talk to students about the concepts and techniques of editing but it is even more effective to see the consequences of decisions in action. The same footage can be made into very different films in the edit room and this was the case here: each of the two versions of Team A's and Team B's footage had its own pace, rhythm, tone, and even meaning, and all this arose from the choices made about where to cut and which shots to juxtapose with which. The rough-cut screenings benefited from input from the two other editors present at YFS during 2008, Australian Melanie Sandford and Finn Tuula Mehtonen. Melanie and Tuula were mentoring separate YFS projects – an artist's documentary and NGO film respectively – but shared their opinions and wide-range of experience with the students working on the 'True Fiction' films.

i) Completion of the Films

As with every YFS workshop, time was of the essence and often in short supply. The editing process was completed as far as possible in Yangon by the students. However, it was necessary for Ivan Horak, the sound mentor, to undertake the final sound-mixes of all four films once back in Europe where editing mentor Jessica Ehlebracht also completed colour correction and the online edits. It is intended that students will be trained further in these two important roles in a 2009 workshop so in future films can be fully completed by YFS students in Yangon rather than having to be brought back to Europe.

ii) Music

A major element in fiction filmmaking is music. There is a debate to be had about whether music can and should be used in a 'True Fiction' film, where the emphasis is placed on filming real people in real places. Is the addition of non-

diagetic music a contradiction to the philosophy of shooting a fiction film in the manner of a documentary? Abbas Kiarostami tends to use music only over his final credits. In the end, one film from each team used music and one did not. Once again this offers a valuable lesson in comparison. The versions with music tend to feel more emotional and aesthetic; the versions without have a stronger 'documentary' atmosphere. Neither is right nor wrong; they are simply different. The music used comes from a Yangon-based composer (who is, in fact, student May Htoo Cho's husband) using traditional Myanmar instruments. It is impressive in its scope and emotional range and adds an interesting layer of texture and meaning to the two versions of *Like A Bubble In Water* where it is used. Along with the script, the actors, the locations and the films that resulted from this entire workshop-experiment, this music is above all else, Burmese.

5. WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

i) The Films

The most tangible outcome of the 2008 'True Fictions' workshop is of course the four filmed versions of *Like A Bubble In Water*. As a viewing of the workshop DVD will illustrate, each film is quite different in pace and tone. The running times range from a brisk 10 minutes for Team B's second edited version to an expansive 18 minutes for Team A's first. It is interesting to note that even in the constricted conditions of this workshop, where everyone used the same script, had the same number of days to shoot and (give or take a crane and dolly!) the same resources, each version of the film has its own visual style and personality. Whether this is from the director, the editor, or the combined teamwork of all the participants is not clear, but each version is a film in itself and does not need to be watched in the context of the other three to be understood.

That said, watching the four films one after another is an intriguing experience which, it is hoped, will be of great value in the development of the YFS filmmakers. Because the films were completed only after the workshop came to an end, it has not yet been possible for mentors and students to sit down together to evaluate and discuss the final pieces of work. However, this will be one of the first activities in the next YFS workshop. The ability to compare and contrast decisions taken at every stage of the process, from casting to locations to shooting styles to edit will prove to be an invaluable teaching tool for students in all disciplines, from directors to camera students, from sound recordists to editors.

(ii) Western Versus Burmese Sensibilities

It will also be valuable to discuss the meaning of the films, and whether this is clear both to Burmese and to western audiences. Throughout the workshop period there was an interesting ongoing debate between mentors and students about how 'Burmese' the films made by YFS would and should be. During the

practice exercises based on the scenes from Kiarostami's *Through The Olive Trees* some students were upset by the third scene, which involved a confrontation between a grandmother and the young man who wants to marry her granddaughter. In Kiarostami's film this scene is highly confrontational. Students were taken aback by how rude they felt the two characters were being to each other, and said that a young Burmese man would never treat an elderly woman in this way. One version of the scene they shot was criticised by some mentors for lacking in drama but, from a Burmese point of view, it was full of quite extraordinary conflict.

This difference between Burmese and western points of view came to the fore again during the filming and cutting of *Like A Bubble In Water*. For example, in the flashback scene retained by Team B, the school-teacher's recollection of his wedding makes the event look like a stiff and – to western eyes at least – melancholy occasion. In the West weddings are exuberant, joyful and often drunken events. Burmese weddings are more formal and decorous. Just because the bride and groom look grave in the flashback does not mean these two people do not care deeply about one another. A smaller, but no less important, detail about weddings – the time at which they are held – leads to a problem in understanding the actual plot in both Team A versions of the film. Burmese weddings always occur in the middle of the day. Hence, by showing a close-up of the clock in U Ohn Thwin's home revealing the time to be late afternoon, both directors and editors believed it would be clear that the protagonist had failed to attend his ex-pupil's wedding. To western eyes this is not clear. The climax of the film – U Ohn Thwin's decision not to go to the wedding – is in danger of coming across as anticlimactic or simply non-existent due to this lack of a shared cultural understanding. A third example is connected to U Ohn Thwin cleaning his dead wife's shoes, and feeling overcome by grief that she has gone. In Burma men and women wear the same kind of slippers, women's are just smaller. Hence, to the students, it is perfectly clear in this key scene that U Ohn Thwin is cleaning his wife's shoes. To western eyes, where we are used to men and women wearing contrasting footwear, the subtlety of this scene may be too great to be fully understood.

These examples show how key parts of a film's plot may be lost to a foreign – particularly a western – audience due to the assumption of meaning which is not shared. This raises the question: for whom are YFS films made, and for whom should they be made? The mentors chose this script because we believed it to be 'Burmese' (though some of the students took issue with this!). Is this 'Burmese' for a western audience, or for the Burmese themselves? Ideally, the films should feel authentic and comprehensible to both Burmese and foreign viewers. This is an area which will be given further consideration in future workshops.

iii) Benefits for the Students

As with every YFS workshop, feedback and evaluations were canvassed from all the participants as the intense four weeks of preparation, shooting and editing drew to a close. The general consensus amongst the students was that, whilst the 'True Fictions' workshop was undoubtedly hard work, it was also a worthwhile experience which allowed them to develop the skills taught on previous YFS workshops as well as learning new techniques specifically related to fiction film-making. To quote the students themselves:

This year we took a new approach. It's an extension of the conventional documentary. We like this approach very much and we've had a chance to learn something new. My established concepts of documentary have been changed and I have a new idea about 'true fictions'. This is very important to me.



Aung Ko Ko

We learnt a lot of new things from this workshop. To speak for myself, I work as a feature-film director. I learned more things from this short course than I had from my years of experience. For example, I learned about a new genre called 'true fictions' and the way films like this can be made and how to deal with inexperienced actors. All of this within the short time of the course.



Kyi Phyu Shin



I've tried to make a number of films in my mind and have many more I'd like to make in the future. The workshop served as an opportunity to put my dreams into practice. I tried to blend some ideas of my own and those from the script and make them work in the film. I'm very satisfied with the workshop.

Thi Ha

The experience of working with a much bigger crew, changing from the three people involved in a typical documentary to the nine in a 'true fictions' film, illustrated the value of working as a team and many students commented on this aspect of the workshop:

I think the unity among team members or the crews while working together has been the most important thing.

Ko Yoe

I think the most important thing of all is team spirit. When we make documentaries, the crew consists of only three members – the director, the camera person and the sound person. ... This time, many more people have been involved so team work plays an even more important role than ever.

Lay Thidar



Advantages I gained from the workshop include patience and tolerance when doing group work and you have to work with a number of other people. I also learned that we need to negotiate and compromise with other people who have different ways of thinking from ourselves.

Mya Darli Aung

The most important thing is the team spirit among all the crew members.

Thu Thu Shein

One of the chief intentions of the 'True Fictions' workshop was to foster the training of less experienced students from the 2007 Beginners Course by students from the Advanced Course who already have had the advantage of three years of YFS training. This appears to have paid off during the workshop:

Now as an assistant, I've learned a lot and in a different way. I know a great deal now for example about lighting and sound, from the more experienced team members. The same is true about editing. The more experienced editors have taught me things so I learned a lot. But I still want to learn more!



May Htoo Cho

Another intention of the workshop was to encourage the students to work on further projects of their own, both documentaries and fiction films made with the documentary ethos as exemplified in 'True Fictions'. This also appears to have been achieved:

Working in this difficult situation has provided me with some ideas to find solutions. All you need to do is to carry out these ideas. To carry out these ideas in real life, we must have similar projects in the future.

Pe Maung Same



I wish to have more projects in the future so I'll be able to apply the knowledge I've gained in the workshop and get more experience. So far, I've gained some experience. I really hope I'll get more projects to work on.

Hnin Ei Hlaing

It would be a waste if there's no chance to apply the knowledge we have gained in the workshop. I think we'll have to make a number of docu-fictions and work on lots of projects. We must create a world of docu-fiction!

Zin Myo Sett

Finally, some mentors who have been involved with YFS from the start were concerned that 'True Fictions' signalled a departure from one of the key strengths of the film school: the training and development of documentary filmmakers. Hopefully the stress this workshop placed on using documentary techniques in the realm of fiction filmmaking means this has not been the case. As one of the students concluded:



Documentary will remain in our flesh and blood. To speak for myself, documentary will remain my favourite form for the rest of my life. But when it comes to things that cannot be created in documentaries, I will resort to fiction. Among fiction films, 'true fictions' are closest to documentary. And that gives us another chance to use another film language.

Myo Min Khin

7. Summary of Achievements of the 'True Fictions' Workshop

In the four weeks of the 'True Fictions' workshop 18 YFS students were trained and given the opportunity to practice making short fiction films with a documentary sensibility. Early on in the planning of 'True Fictions', the school's director Lindsey Merrison expressed the fear that this workshop may lead the stu-

dents away from one of the major strengths of YFS filmmaking to date: the observation and interpretation of reality through the lens of the documentary camera. Fiction filmmaking might be perceived as more glamorous, dramatic and exciting. The students could sacrifice the truth of documentary for the flash of fiction. This happened, to a certain extent, during the first few days of the workshop. When students started bringing in tracks and cranes and treating the (non) actors like moveable props rather than human beings, the hearts of the mentors sank. Some of our worst fears appeared to be being justified.

However, after the initial ideas of 'glamorous' fiction filmmaking had been revealed to be a misconception – 'true fiction' filmmaking is just as hard work, if not harder, than documentary filming – it was interesting to note that the students individually and as teams found their way back to their documentary roots. Some of the strongest aspects of all four films are in the moments of quiet observation where directors, camera people and sound recordists trained in the documentary discipline of watching their protagonists' closely in order to capture their essence on film, used this talent in the service of a fictional story. This conjunction between documentary techniques and fictional storytelling is one that has excited filmmakers around the world, from the post-war Italian neo-realists to Iranian filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami in the 1980s and 1990s to the work of the Belgian Dardenne brothers and young filmmakers from Eastern Europe (the Rumanian 'New Wave', for example) today. The limited resources for filmmaking in Myanmar, combined with the country's political situation, lend itself to this kind of low-profile, low-budget, realist style of filmmaking. The 'True Fictions' workshop is a small but important step on the way to training the next generation of Burmese filmmakers in techniques which should give them the opportunity to express themselves and tell stories from Myanmar now, and in the years to come.

Rachel Mathews, March 2009

Beginners Workshop

1.11. – 12.11.08

A ten-day introduction to Documentary Filmmaking was provided by tutors Lindsey Merrison, Lars Barthel and Ivan Horak for two new students, **Han Lin Aung** and **Su Su Win Hlaing**. During this time both students were introduced on **Days 1-3** via lectures and film viewings, on how to film stories from real life in an artistic, engaging way.

After basic training and a number of preliminary exercises on **Days 4 and 5** the students were asked to research and write on **Days 6 and 7** a brief proposal for a short documentary portrait of a friend or relative. The tutors decided that the beginner crew of two should film Han Lin Aung's mother-in-law in a manageable

home environment rather than venture into the streets to portray Su Su Hlaing's subject, a market-seller who manages to wear a smile in spite of a life of considerable hardship and illness.

The crew filmed for two days on **Days 8 and 9** with Han Linn Aung on sound and Su Su on camera and their material was analysed on their return from filming in the early evenings by the tutors. Soon realising the difficulty of eliciting a natural, relaxed response from their protagonist (who looked as if she were being interrogated by her son-in-law!) the novice documentarians decided to swap roles. No sooner did Han Lin Aung retreat behind the camera and hand over the interviewing to Su Su, than his mother-in-law relaxed and blossomed as she talked about her life and the importance of literacy on the final day of this workshop. The film was digitalised on **Day 10** and is currently being edited in Yangon by YFS student **Mae Htoo Cho**.

Treatment Writing Workshop and Pitching Session

8.12. – 11.12.08

During the penultimate week of the workshop, tutor Lindsey Merrison provided those students not involved on the edit of the four versions of **Like a Bubble in Water** with an opportunity to identify and develop their own ideas for independent documentaries.

On **Day 1** she discussed the process of putting ideas down on paper – from log-lines to treatments – and asked students Pe Maung Same, Myo Min Khin, Aung Ko Ko, Zin Myo Sett, Tay Zar, Thu Thu Shein, Wai Mar Nyunt and Mya Darli Aung, Ko Nwai and Thi Ha to take part in a creative writing exercise.

On **Day 2** students were asked to describe their documentary ideas and create log-lines and short synopses that could be pitched on to the whole group. The afternoons on Days 1 and 2 were given over to completing these writing exercises and results were discussed in one-to-one tutorials with Lindsey.

On **Day 3** students discussed and rehearsed pitches with the Treatment Writing group during which Lindsey helped students to find a focus for their ideas as well as the right words with which to present their ideas to the whole group. The projects pitched on **Day 4** were a mixture of documentaries and fiction films and ranged from a poetic feature-length documentary following the route of the Ayeyarwaddy, Myanmar's main river, to a fictional story looking at the real practice of a tribe in Eastern Shan State who are not allowed to marry out of their own bloodline – a kind of Burmese 'Romeo and Juliet'.

These projects will be developed further over the coming months and then another pitching session will be held with all the YFS students attending and being asked to vote on which projects they would like to give the green-light to and finance. It is hoped that at least one of these projects, if not more, will go into production during 2009.

It has always been the intention of YFS to train filmmakers to the level where they will be able to initiate, work on and complete high quality and well-constructed projects of their own. To this end, the pitching sessions for Documentary Treatment and Fiction Screenplays were important since they

- Ease students into practices for the development and commissioning of projects that are prevalent in the film industry worldwide
- Encourage communication and exchange between students
- Encourage participation of all YFS members and galvanise the YFS filmmakers as an artistic group.

The Art of Documentary Editing Workshop

24.11. – 13.12.08

After the initial 'True Fictions' exercise, editing tutors **Melanie Sandford** from Australia and **Tuula Mehtonen** from Finland began guiding two YFS directing students, **Shin Daewe** and **Wai Mar Nyunt**, through the three-week edit of their documentary projects: Shin Daewe's **An Untitled Life** enshrines the indomitable spirit of the jovial and unorthodox Rahula, an artist from Mingun near Mandalay; and Wai Mar Nyunt's low-key **Sun Behind the Clouds**, which was commissioned



Editing Tutor Tuula Mehtonen working with Wai Mar Nyunt on *Sun Behind the Clouds*

by the NGO World Concern, looks at how a Community Health Worker in Chin State in northern Myanmar has managed to overcome the harsh blows that life has dealt her.

Tuula Mehtonen, who joined the Yangon Film School workshops as a tutor for the first time in 2008, has the following comments about her experience:

The director of this film, Wai Mar Nyunt had never edited before. Having to edit a fifteen-minute film from twenty hours of material in three weeks is not an ideal way to begin to learn editing. Nonetheless I tried to let Wai Mar edit her own film as freely as possible without the pressure of having to finish the task. This meant that I took the responsibility for the schedule and the structure of the film. As a visual artist, Wai Mar had a natural sense of how to build up a scene when she felt inspired, but, in order to learn to think like a real editor she would have benefited from a step by step approach involving shorter exercises. Nevertheless it was crucial for Wai Mar as a director to have this editing experience since it helped her to realise the importance of choosing and testing the main protagonist carefully in advance. The protagonist of **Sun Behind the Clouds** was a very shy person who needed to be filmed much more in close up in order to be able to emphasize her sensitivity. Any lack of drama in the situation has to be compensated with some other focus. Wai Mar understood that the tragic death of the main character's husband, and the decisive way in which her sons had introduced their mother to a new husband was one such opportunity and this was cleverly picked up and covered in the material. This touching 'love story' was nicely interwoven with the client's required information about testing a certain type of malaria.

Sound Design and Post-Production Workshop

15.12. – 19.12.08

Post-production editing tutor Jessica Ehlebracht from Germany and Czech Sound Design tutor Ivan Horak spent the fifth week of the workshops concentrating on teaching YFS students how to fine-cut and mix the two YFS documentaries, **Sun Behind the Clouds** and **An Untitled Life** as well as the four versions of **Like a Bubble in Water**. Although Jessica Ehlebracht had planned to teach colour grading and subtitling, the fine-tuning of the structure of the four versions of **Like A Bubble in Water** proved so time-consuming that she was not able to devote any time to the technical aspects of post-production in 2008. It is hoped that more time will be made for post-production during the 2009 workshops.

Czech Sound Design Tutor **Ivan Horak** had this to say about his course:

Sound also corresponds relatively to reality but, just like in other cases, it often invites a certain degree of stylization. The YFS Sound Design workshop 2008 dealt with the possibilities of sound stylization. When shooting a narrative film, it is necessary to pay attention to a good quality of primary sound just as in documentary film; at the same time, it is absolutely vital in the production stage to consider the editing issues. Sound recordists should eliminate incongruous sounds and concentrate on those that create a true illusion of reality. It is good to capture dialogues in as clean a way as possible and record the setting sounds off the camera as sound itself. Sound recordists all over the world use this method and it is the key to success.



Sound Design Tutor Ivan Horak with (l-r) Zin Myo Sett, Kyaw Myo Lwin and Pe Maung Same

Very important, if not the most important, is the input of a sound designer who creates the sound track of the film. Not by chance does director George Lucas claim that sound makes up fifty per cent of the film. Sound design is able to substantially change the nature of the film so that it is necessary to handle dialogues, sound effects, moods and music with the utmost care.

In order to provide better teaching conditions we set up a small sound facility where I was able to point out some of the aspects of sound dramaturgy. I primarily focused on the work with dialogues, selection of suitable sound moods and, last but not least, music. The students and I tried to find fitting music and often recorded music ourselves. Our efforts were not always successful and several times we turned to professional musicians who were always kind to help.

The work for YFS was again very enriching and in many ways inspirational not only for the students but also for the tutors who will surely feel the effects carry over into their careers in the film industry. Overall, I would evalu-

ate this Yangon Film School workshop in very positive terms, despite a slight lack of time provided for my classes involving sound during the completion stage.

Screenwriting & Pitching Workshop

8.12. – 11.12.08

(i) Rationale

Following the successful two week Art of Screenwriting workshop in November 2007, YFS wanted to build upon the practice of working with talented Myanmar writers, training them in the specific skills required for screenwriting. The rationale behind the 2008 course was not only to assist writers in adding the genre of script to their repertoire, but also to foster links between Yangon-based writers and YFS filmmakers, with the ultimate goal that some of these writers and students will form collaborative relationships to make fiction films – both short and, more ambitiously, feature length – in the future. It is hoped YFS trained writers will also work on documentary films made by YFS students. For example, two YFS filmmakers are currently developing a documentary about Myanmar's great Ayeyarwaddy River. They intend a poetic voiceover to be an integral part of this documentary and it is proposed that a YFS trained screenwriter will work with them on creating this voiceover.

Because the bulk of time during the YFS 2008 workshop was taken up with the ambitious 'True Fictions' project, there was only a short amount of time – four days – in which to work with screenwriters. Script tutor Rachel Mathews therefore elected to develop story ideas with the group which they could pitch to YFS students at the end of the workshop.

(ii) The Writers

In 2007, YFS Director Lindsey Merrison found a variety of screenwriters with varying degrees of experience to participate in the workshop. Some, like the poet **Linn Ti Oo**, and the prose fiction writer **Dr Aung Min**, were well-established names in the Yangon literary scene. Others, such as YFS students **Mai Htoo Cho** and **The Maw Naing**, were younger and had less experience. Whilst we did not wish to exclude younger writers from the 2008 workshop – and indeed, every 2007 screenwriting participant was invited to attend again in 2008, and the majority did – we also knew there were older, more experienced writers living in Yangon with whom it would be interesting to work. Hence Lindsey Merrison and Rachel Mathews spent time before the 2008 workshop meeting writers and researching the network of writing talent in the city. It was discovered that Yangon writers have established an informal network of friendship and support. Once we

met one writer, they often suggested others whom they thought it would be interesting for us to meet.



Participants of the four-day screenplay pitching with tutor Rachel Mathews (standing centre back), YFS Director Lindsey Merrison (kneeling, right) and, next to her, interpreter Lincoln

Following this research period, 14 writers were selected for the workshop. Alongside **Linn Ti Oo** and **Dr Aung Min** were established writers such as **Khet Mar**, who has already had experience of one of her stories being made into a short film in Japan; **Tun Win Nyein**, who is editor of Beauty Magazine; ex-Nun **Mocha** and well-known short story writer **Lu San**. As with all YFS workshops, the balance of the sexes was maintained, with seven female and seven male participants. The workshop was held in Burmese and translator **Lincoln** became an integral part of the team.

(iii) The Workshop

As stated above, the packed schedule of the YFS 2008 Workshops meant only four days could be allotted for the screenwriting course. Hence participants were asked to come to the workshop with an idea for a short film already in place. This could be a short story or poem which the writer believed had potential to be adapted for the screen; alternatively, it could be a new idea developed specifically for the workshop.

During **Day 1** Tutor Rachel Mathews introduced the main principals behind screenwriting, placing particular emphasis on character development and structure and illustrating her discussion with screenings from successful short films and from her own script work.

Days 2 and 3 were devoted to developing the writers' ideas. Each writer was given their own slot, lasting around an hour each, to present their story. The tutor then helped the class to structure this story into a coherent screenplay outline. By carrying out this structuring exercise 'in public', encouraging the other writers to discuss and question the idea, the class became familiar with the building-blocks that are integral to almost every screen-story. Analysing the ideas of other writers and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their proposals, led to a greater understanding of these key concepts when it came to developing the writer's own work.

Some strong screenplay proposals came out of the workshop. In line with the 'True Fictions' ethos of the 2008 filmmaking workshop, the writers were encouraged to develop stories based on authentic aspects of Myanmar life – perhaps even on true stories – which had the potential to be filmed in the documentary-fiction crossover style developed in 'True Fictions'. **Tun Win Nyein** proposed a touching story about a monk who finds an abandoned baby and brings the boy up as his own until conflict between his spiritual calling and the boy's worldly needs forces him to allow a lay-couple to adopt his 'son'; **Thet Ko Ko**, one of the younger writers from 2007, developed an outline about a trishaw driver whose ambitions of owning his own trishaw are destroyed in an accident, but who nevertheless keeps on plying his trade on the streets of Yangon, believing one day his dream will be fulfilled; **Phyu Mon**, a visual artist and writer, created an intriguing story about a widowed father who earns his living as a Nat Medium and the embarrassment and resentment this causes in his teenage son; **Lu San** proposed a comedy about a stiff, middle-aged businessman who wants nothing more than to play with a hoop as he did when he was a child.

Day 4 was devoted to training the writers in how to 'pitch' i.e. give a verbal presentation of their ideas, and culminated in a pitch to YFS students. The students were also given an opportunity to discuss the kind of stories they would like to make into films. This two hour session was lively and extremely interesting and, it is hoped, will lead to collaboration between the screenwriters and students in 2009 and beyond.

(iv) Future Screenwriting Plans

After the verbal pitching session the writers developed a half-page written synopsis of their screenplay proposal. These were collated and distributed by email to all the YFS students. If any of the students would like to develop one or more of the ideas with the writers, tutor Rachel Mathews will act as mentor for the ensuing script. The initial mentoring will be carried out by email. It is planned that such scripts will be developed further and made ready for production in a face-to-face YFS Art of Screenwriting workshop in 2009 or 2010.

Rachel Mathews, March 2009

9. YFS Annual Screening

A screening during the workshops of work made by YFS filmmakers outside the workshops during the course of 2008 for NGOs World Concern, Shalom Foundation, Action Aid, Metta and FXB Myanmar proved to be a real hit. Held at the workshop venue before diplomats, representatives of various development organisations and agencies (local and international) as well as programme-makers from Myanmar broadcaster MRTV4 and the Myanmar Filmmakers Organisation, the screening of these films – **The Change Maker** about a remarkable young female volunteer's bid to promote behavioural change in a remote village in Kachin State in northern Myanmar, **Saving Sankar** about fighting malaria in the same part of the country, and the daring portrait of a charismatic virus-positive man's efforts to support others living with Aids in Yangon in **My Positive Life** – serves not only to advertise the expertise of YFS filmmakers to potential clients, but will also pave the way for future outlets for their work.



The Yangon Film School's Annual Screening before an audience of diplomats, NGO representatives and Myanmar media workers

10. Direct Results of YFS Workshops and Activities in 2008

(i) Visible outcomes

In 2008, YFS participants took part in, produced or are developing:

- 5 residential and semi-residential workshops;
- 2 non-residential workshops conducted by 'Flying Mentors';
- 4 edited versions of one docufiction screenplay **Like a Bubble in Water**;

- Five 15-20-minute films for NGOs: **Saving Sankar, Rays of Hope, My Positive Life, Sun Behind the Clouds** and **The Change Maker**;
- One short promotional film for World Concern about their Nargis response, "Helping Hands";
- One short promotional compilation for the British Council and the British Embassy Rangoon;
- One 20-minute documentary portrait **An Untitled Life**;
- 14 pitched ideas for docufiction and fiction screenplays;
- 6 pitched ideas for feature-length documentaries;
- The first YFS feature-length creative documentary co-production with an international broadcaster;

The films marked in bold, as well as a short film about the True Fictions Workshop including comments from both participants and tutors, are available on two Yangon Film School DVDs: **True Fictions – A Docufiction Workshop held by the Yangon Film School in Myanmar, 2008** and **Stories from Myanmar 2008 – Six documentaries made by students of the Yangon Film School** to be released in April 2009.

(ii) 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.

(iii) Dissemination of YFS Films

a) Commissioned Projects for NGOs and Aid Agencies

Yangon Film School filmmakers are quickly gaining a reputation for authentic, well-crafted documentaries on a plethora of relevant topics portraying the work of the development sector in Myanmar. In 2008 students made five films for NGOs, including the British Embassy Rangoon commissioned **The Change Maker**, about a unique volunteer programme spearheaded by ActionAid, Metta and Shalom Foundations; two films made for World Concern focussing on the fight against malaria: **Saving Sankar** and **Sun Behind the Clouds**, and two films for FXB Myanmar that tell moving stories about vocational training (**Rays of Hope**) and the charismatic leader of a psychosocial support group for virus positive people in **My Positive Life**.

Among commissions currently in development are documentaries focussing on the space for development and empowerment of local NGOs that has opened up in the wake of cyclone Nargis. In 2009 YFS filmmakers have been asked to develop projects about:

- Local NGOs working on environmental issues such as **community forestry** in Kachin State;
- **Education under a religious umbrella** (including the work of charismatic monks such as U Nayaka in Paung Daw Oo in Sagaing Division),
- A long-term observational work comparing the benefits of a new micro-credit scheme for villagers farming tracts of land for **rice production** as opposed to more conventional contract farming (all for Pyoe Pin);
- **Child protection** programmes (Save the Children);
- The training of **HIV facilitators** all over the country (for UNAIDS).

b) Independent Projects by YFS filmmakers

In addition to client-based work, YFS filmmakers continue to develop projects of their own, such as Shin Daewe's vibrant portrait of Rahula, a painter and maverick from Mingun in northern Myanmar.

The filmmakers are also working on a creative feature-length documentary inspired by their own post-Nargis relief work in the Delta. This project marks the first YFS co-production with an international broadcaster.



Director Shin Daewe with Hnin Ei Hlaing (on sound) and Thaidi (on camera) filming the painter Rahula at his studio in Mingun

c) Yangon Film School Films at International Film Festivals

In 2008, no less than six short films by YFS students were screened at international film festivals: **Water Boy**, **Beyond the Light** and **Girls Like Us** were shown at the **Sydney Film Festival** in Australia, **A Million Threads** at the Nyon Documentary film festival **Visions du Reel** in **Switzerland**, a **A Sketch of Wathone** premiered at the **National Geographic All Roads Film Festival** in **Washington and Los Angeles** and **Again and Again** was screened at the **Zebra Poetry Film Festival** and **Inter-film Festivals** in **Berlin**.



Two films – **A Sketch of Wathone** and **Again and Again** – won, respectively, awards for ‘Best Short Film’ (All Roads Festival) and a Special Mention (Zebra Poetry Film Festival Berlin). We are delighted that the filmmakers were able to travel to both of these festivals and could receive their awards in person.

Kyi Phyu Shin receiving her Best Short Award at the National Geographic All Roads Film Festival in Los Angeles in October 2008

d) Myanmar Television, YFS Crews

The YFS was particularly pleased that two of the school’s films – **A Day with Aye Nan Lin** and **Peace of Mind** – were passed by the Myanmar censor and were broadcast on MRTV4 in April 2008. In a climate notoriously hostile to independent media, this marked a significant achievement. We are hopeful that MRTV4 and MRTV3 will become a regular showcase for the work of YFS filmmakers.

Filmmakers from the YFS Group are also sought after as **crews** for MRTV4, Aid Agencies (UNDP) and foreign production companies from Asia and Europe.

e) Study Trips Abroad and Exchanges

The Yangon Film began its first cooperation with **the Czech film school FAMU** in Prague in 2007 when two students received one-year scholarships from this legendary school of performing arts to take part in a multimedia course geared to international students. In 2009/2010 two female YFS will be given the opportunity to join this one-year FAMU course.

YFS students have also taken part in two-week study trips to the **Berlin Film Festival's Berlinale Talent Campus** in 2008 and 2009. One YFS student is currently in Germany until May working with YFS mentor Ulrike Schaz and renowned British born editor Andrew Bird on the YFS students' post-Nargis documentary.

In 2009 YFS will begin cooperating with the UK-based **Charles Wallace Burma Trust** to enable one outstanding student to take part in a three-month placement, either in an academic or professional environment. In 2010 the YFS also plans to launch an **Exchange Programme** (beginning with a cooperation with the **Royal Danish Film School**) during which Guest Lecturers and/or students from film schools and media organisations in Europe and Asia will be invited to Yangon, followed by a (4-6 week) study trip for up to six members of the YFS group to these schools and organisations abroad.

X Conclusions and the Next Step

As the Yangon Film School project enters its fifth year, its diverse activities in Myanmar and abroad provides ample evidence for both the deep pool of talent that exists among Myanmar's young artistic community as well as the way in which the school's vision is gradually becoming reality. In 2009 it is important to consolidate the artistic and technical skills of filmmakers as editors, post-production technicians, producers and production managers. Encouraging experienced students to train novice filmmakers and those with less experience is a crucial step towards creating a wider community of skilled media workers and establishing the YFS as a professional and creative media resource.

(i) Workshops in 2009

As in 2008, workshops in 2009 will continue to emphasise teaching, analysis and experimentation, but there will also be a strong practical component, geared to improving infrastructure and project management at the **YFS House**. The aim of these workshops is to encourage YFS students to continue to develop their own artistic identity as filmmakers – and find ways of exhibiting their work at home and abroad.

Funds permitting, in 2009 YFS workshops will focus on the following:

- Editing
- Production including copyright and contractual aspects of filmmaking
- Post-Production
- Sound design and mixing
- Mise-en-scène (history of film form)
- Film music composition
- Screenwriting and Treatment writing
- A **Beginners Course** for 12 new filmmaking students

(ii) Flying Mentorships

The YFS will continue to respond to the needs of the YFS students as both producers of commissioned films and emergent filmmakers in their own right. For this reason, projects for clients will as far as possible, be developed, filmed and edited outside residential workshops. These projects will be mentored throughout the year by YFS tutors either virtually via email or in the flesh during trips to Yangon as 'flying mentors'.

Lindsey Merrison, Berlin, March 2009