



65<sup>th</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Competition



A person is seen from behind, standing in the rain. The rain is falling heavily, creating a misty atmosphere. The person is standing on a wet surface, possibly a street or a plaza. In the background, there are blurred buildings and trees, suggesting an urban setting. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

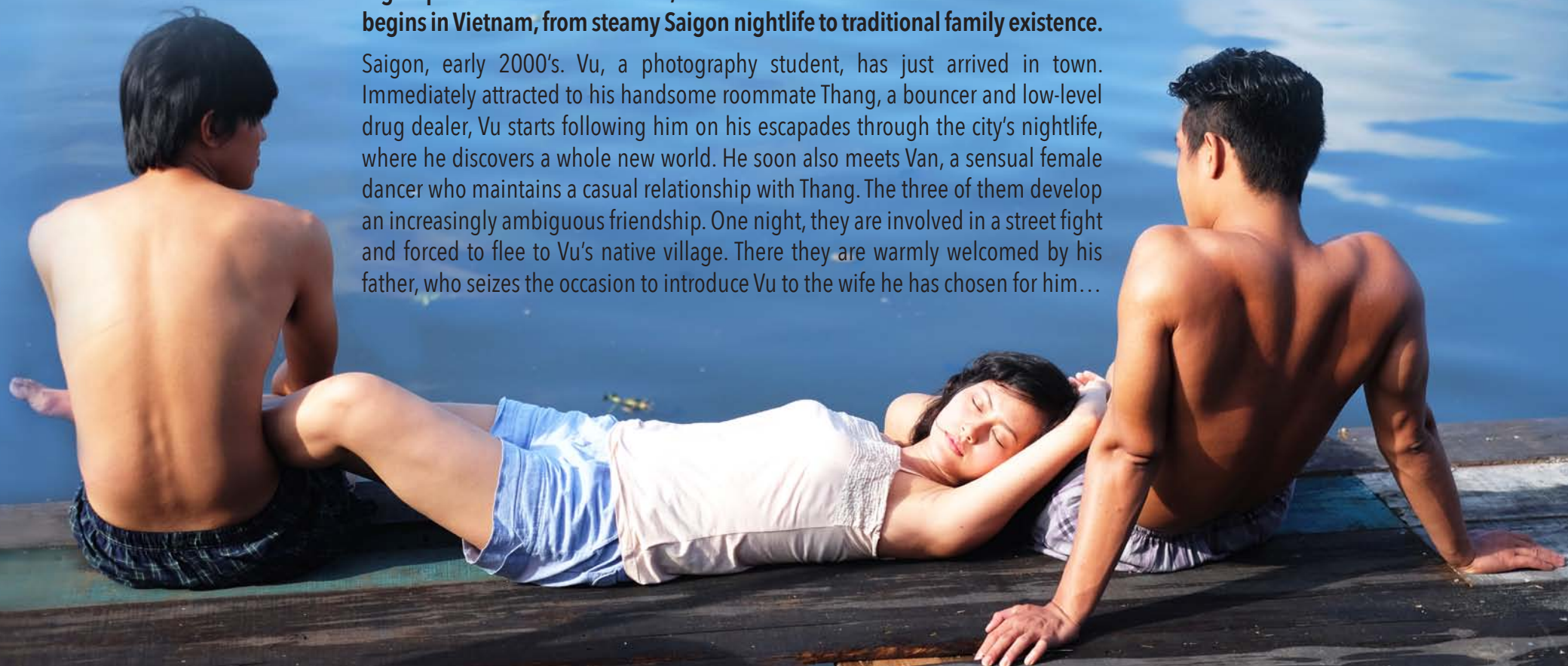
# BIG FATHER, SMALL FATHER AND OTHER STORIES

*a film by* PHAN ĐĂNG DI

# SYNOPSIS

**A group of friends discover love, lust and each other as the new millennium begins in Vietnam, from steamy Saigon nightlife to traditional family existence.**

Saigon, early 2000's. Vu, a photography student, has just arrived in town. Immediately attracted to his handsome roommate Thang, a bouncer and low-level drug dealer, Vu starts following him on his escapades through the city's nightlife, where he discovers a whole new world. He soon also meets Van, a sensual female dancer who maintains a casual relationship with Thang. The three of them develop an increasingly ambiguous friendship. One night, they are involved in a street fight and forced to flee to Vu's native village. There they are warmly welcomed by his father, who seizes the occasion to introduce Vu to the wife he has chosen for him...





What makes a person so easily deny the responsibility of being a father, one that is very important in the Asian country like Vietnam? This question has obsessed me for 14 years.

But back then I was a young geek with less experience in life, and I had just started my first lessons in love and drinking. As time goes by, I'm getting older and more tired. My youth has gone with passionate nights, drinking days, pathetic moments looking up at the ceiling, desires, failures, bargains and compromises... With the passing of time everything becomes clearer, these characters appear to me with specific faces, voices, bodies, happiness, sadness and emptiness... I begin to see these people in the street, in public, in bars. I see them sweating while carrying big bags over the plank connecting the boat and the port. I see them throwing up in the darkness. I see them dancing crazily in the dazzling light and chaos of a nightclub...

I see them in the rain of Mekong Delta, in the sunshine of Saigon. I see them tossing and turning in bed during a sleepless night, or having sex passionately, or trembling to touch the other. I see them kissing and throwing themselves into the grey river. I see them singing in front of drunk men. I hear them walking far away, hoarse voices screaming in the night. I see the beautiful sweating body of a young boy. I see young girls braiding their hair. I see Saigon on a sunny day at the end of the year...

---

*Phan Dang Di*

**DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

---



I see that sometimes my characters are stubborn. They don't follow my guidelines, and they act as if it was real life: unusual, meaningless, instinctive. Their thoughts may come after their actions. Their sadness may come after the separation... I can watch them, but I cannot judge them. I may know whether they are sad or joyful, sorrowful or happy, but in truth I cannot measure such feelings...

Since my characters were alive before this film and will continue living on after it ends, all I can say is that everything you see in the film is just a certain moment – one specific time - of their lives...

---

*Phan Dang Di*

**DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

---





---

# IN CONVERSATION WITH

## *Phan Dang Di*

---

**Can you contextualize the short but intense period from the end of the 90's through the first years of the new millennium in Vietnam?**

It was a very special time. I remember the year I enrolled in Ha Noi Film School (1994), and President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam. Finally, 19 years after the war, one day, a country that was isolated in poverty and despair by United States and the rest of the world woke up and saw all the opportunities open to us. Everyone was eager and began thinking of growing rich, without a fear of being imprisoned as in the past. Then, foreigners such as Taiwanese, Japanese, and Koreans flocked to this country to open up factories and recruit young people from rural areas to work. In the city, the youth also had more choices. A consumer society began to take shape, in Hanoi and in Saigon, bars and discos began to open up, initially to serve the customers from Taiwan, Japan, Korea and the West, but quickly turning into a gathering place for young urban people. During that period, going to night clubs was a sign of "being cool" and wealthy.







# IN CONVERSATION WITH

## *Phan Dang Di*

**What is the relationship between your own life and the stories you choose to tell? Do the child in your debut feature *BI DON'T BE AFRAID*, or the young photography Student in this film, *Vu*, reflect your own experiences growing up?**

Of course, I find myself in both Bi and Vu, although a lot of material came from my imagination. With Bi, perhaps it comes from my childhood love of ice-cubes and ice-cream, and memories of watermelon fields when I lived with my parents in rural areas, where they taught and raised pigs and chickens, and grew all kind of crops and plants for food.

With Vu, it's partially my memories of the time I was studying cinema in Hanoi. At that time the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had already collapsed, but the Russian style of cinema education still remained. During the first 2 years we had to bike everywhere to take pictures, then bathe them in chemicals and develop them entirely by ourselves. But the problem was that ORWO photographic papers from East Germany were no longer imported, and what we had to use was expired ORWO photo paper. Therefore, we couldn't develop a really beautiful photo, the overall color tone of these photos was so dull and dark grey.

When you have to ride a bike for several miles to find beautiful scenery, and then you end up in the dark room with an ugly photo, it becomes a failure you cannot forget. It becomes an obsession, because the conditions you need to create or reach something beautiful are out of your control.

But later, when I grew up, I realized that even with all the tools, the beauty I truly desire might be unreachable. Just like Vu can't take a photo of his lover that is not blurry.

**Both of your films revolve around groups of people - how they change, grow, suffer or love together rather than a single individual. Is there more to be captured in the collective experience, rather than for example a psychological character study?**

All my films have many characters, and this is one reason not everyone likes them. Maybe it seems like I don't have enough time to dig deeper into studying the progress of any one character's internal conflict, to make them like a "normal" character should be.



# IN CONVERSATION WITH

## *Phan Dang Di*



But to me, you cannot have just one central point, or one central pain or tragedy told through just one character. I want to have many characters next to each other, to project their issues overlapping with each other. I try to have a broader view about humans, in terms of psychology, physicality, emotions and thoughts. And more importantly, this way, I can show the great equality of all individuals facing life. A personal problem is always just a personal problem, while life keeps moving on as a flow, and we are all just a grain of sand in that flow.

**What role do cinematography and visual lyricism play in your films? At what stage of the creative process do you develop the visual language for your films?**

To me, the film's visual style, besides the fact that it helps tell the story from the script, should also tell a story in itself. Usually, creating the visual language for the film begins during the location scouting stage. So in this case it started almost 3 years ago. We scouted the locations very carefully, and usually, if I like a particular location, I will film there at almost any cost. In "Big father, Small Father, and Other Stories", Vu's father's (Mr. Sau's) house and the surrounding woods were shot in the Can Gio mangrove forest, where "Vietnamese Communist" soldiers sheltered and occasionally attacked Si Gon from back in the old days. Its ancient mangroves with weird roots that I'm fascinated with. At the time both my DOP and producer warned me that it would be dangerous to shoot in a mangrove area, away from residential areas and any electricity. I didn't pay attention to their warning, and the result was 15 days of shooting in Can Gio, which became a nightmare for the crew. When the rain poured down into the forest, snakes would crawl out, and everyone was exhausted and terrified to a point that some of them wanted to quit. On the 8th day, we had to organize a small party for the crew, and I stood up to apologize for pushing everyone into these stressful working conditions, but I convinced them to keep working. Luckily, it didn't rain again afterwards, so we were able to continue our shoot. Even though we had a stressful time in Can Gio, I still feel satisfied because of these beautiful images of the house, the forests, and the rivers on screen. They look exactly the way I wanted.

---

# IN CONVERSATION WITH

*Phan Dang Di*

---

**Your films often invoke strong symbols - from the ice in *BI DON'T BE AFRAID* to the mud in *BIG FATHER*. Do you consciously seek to incorporate the symbolism of nature or "the elements" in your films, and is this rooted in any kind of traditional storytelling?**

We should consider nature, or other tangible elements in my films, such as ice or mud, or intangible factors, such as the sound of animals, street noise, or rain etc... are a certain form of the characters than a symbol. I don't like symbols, because I feel like when an element becomes a symbol, it is drained of life.

Mud has long-standing roots in Vietnamese life. We are a people who grow rice and naturally, our farmers plug young rice plants into the mud to replicate them. In ancient Northern villages, there was a game where they catch eels in big jars during spring. Every unmarried couple will pair up, stand next to a big jar, which is filled with mud and eels, and after the start signal, the man will use one hand to squeeze the woman's breast, another hand tries to catch eels in the jar. The woman can do whatever she wants except push the man's hand away from her breast. The couple that catch the most eels in the required time, will win and receive a prize from the village. Mud, in this game, reminds me of procreation, which is why I let Mr. Sau and Huong making love in mud.

However, mud can also be very cold, like the scene where Van is left in the giant mud barrel. That mud doesn't remind us of procreation but of loneliness and fear.

**How do you negotiate - either by working within or navigating around - the weight of an ever present censorship mechanism? Has this forced you to be more creative in terms of putting viable projects together?**

Censorship is still something offensive, but it's better when we don't think of it as a boogeyman to scare us. Usually, when I make a film, I will shoot every scene I think is necessary, despite the fact some scenes may not pass censorship later on. I always keep a positive thought that, if the censorship moderator's job is to cut out scenes, then the filmmaker's job is to make the most perfect film that is possible, even if its integrity might be violated by the blade of the censorship board.



**How did you put together this ensemble cast, including the well known actress Hai Yen Do Thi?**

The best way for a famous actress like Hai Yen and a non actor who has never been in any film before like Le Cong Hoang to work together comfortably, is to let them meet up, get acquainted with each other and rehearse. Two years before the shoot, Hoang was sent to rehearse with Yen. Hoang also witnessed Yen returning to ballet after 17 years (Yen graduated ballet school in Vietnam), and he also witnessed how she went on a strict diet to lose 7kg at the request of the director. I think, with a famous actress such as Hai Yen, her attitude and harsh-determination when preparing for a role has great impact on the other cast members, and gives them a sense of pride in the work they are doing.

Film production in Vietnam is developing very fast, but possibly because of this, people are not focused on preparing thoroughly for a project, everything is done in a rush. For movies like mine, the preparation process takes long time to set up, therefore, without patience and understanding partners, it's almost impossible to make it.

**Has the success of your first feature BI, DON'T BE AFRAID - being selected and awarded in Cannes and other international film festivals - impacted the way you work on films at home, or the way you're perceived by the cinema community in Vietnam?**



Yes, and it's a positive impact. The independent films, the arthouse films are becoming more well known in Vietnam, and I'm not the only person here making these kinds of films. Apparently, Nguyen Hoang Diep, a young female director, also my producer from "Bi, Don't Be Afraid", had a victory at Venice Critics Week with her directorial debut, "Flapping in the middle of Nowhere"; while domestically, this film had a good effect and will be released commercially by CGV in their biggest and most modern theater chain in Vietnam.

I also believe that in the next few years, art films from Vietnam will become better known to the world, and not only in Vietnam.

**Did you draw from any other films or references in depicting youth in the big city?**

If you talk about youth in the metropolis, there is no filmmaker that obsesses me more than Tsai Ming-Liang. The first time I visited Taipei, while wandering the streets, I was always thinking: "Damn, it is so true how this director made this city immortal." I went there for the first time but I felt like I had known the city for a long time, because Tsai's movies portrayed this city from its gut, not just its appearance.

# BIO-FILMOGRAPHY

## *Phan Dang Di*

Phan Dang Di was born in 1976 in Nghe An - Viet Nam. After graduating from Hanoi University of Cinema and Theatre, Phan Dang Di started his career as an independent filmmaker. He is currently teaching screenwriting at Hanoi National University and Ho Chi Minh City University. Phan Dang Di is part of the new wave of filmmakers from Vietnam.

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2015 BIG FATHER, SMALL FATHER AND OTHER STORIES (CHA VA CON VA)

2010 DON'T BE AFRAID, BI! (BI, DUNG SO!)

*Cannes Critics' Week - SACD Award and ACID/CCAS Prize*

2009 ADRIFT (CHOI VOI) - Screenwriter

*Venice Orizzonti / Toronto International Film Festival*

2006 WHEN I AM 20 (KHI TOI 20) - Short Film

2005 LOTUS (Sen) - Short Film





# CAST

Do Thi Hai Yen  
Le Cong Hoang  
Truong The Vinh  
Nguyen Ha Phong  
Mai Quoc Viet  
Truong Van Hoang  
Kieu Trinh  
Nguyen Thi Thanh Truc  
Thanh Tu  
Chau The Tam  
Pham Thi Linh Dang  
Do Thi Anh Hong  
Pham Thi Bich Hong

VAN  
VU  
THANG  
MR. SAU (THE FATHER)  
TUNG (THE SINGER)  
CUONG (THE FACTORY WORKER)  
MRS. PHUNG  
HUONG (THE YOUNG WOMAN)  
MAI (TUNG'S SISTER)  
BINH BOONG (THE MAFIA GUY)  
CUONG'S GIRLFRIEND  
XUAN (VU'S SISTER)  
HONG (VU'S SISTER)

# CREW

ORIGINAL TITLE: CHA VA CON VA

Director  
Screenplay  
Director of Photography  
Artistic Director  
Editor  
Sound Design  
Make-Up

Costume Designer  
Choreographer  
Assistant Director  
Production Manager  
Produced by

Co-Produced by

Producers

Executive Producers

Phan Dang Di  
Phan Dang Di  
Nguyen K' Linh  
Nguyen Dinh Phong  
Julie Béziau  
Franck Desmoulins  
Lilian Tran  
Ton Nu Diem Trinh  
Huynh My Ngoc  
Nguyen Ngoc Anh  
Xinh Xan Tina  
Huynh Long Hai  
DNY VIET NAM PRODUCTIONS  
ACROBATES FILMS  
BUSSE & HALBERSCHMIDT  
FILMPRODUKTION  
VOLYA FILMS  
Tran Thi Bich Ngoc  
Claire-Agnès Lajoumard  
Calvin T. Lam  
Le Hang Lizeroux Nguyen

VIETNAM, FRANCE, GERMANY, THE NETHERLANDS - 2015 - 102 MINS - 2:35 - 5.1 - 24 FPS - VIETNAMESE



# WORLD SALES

UDI 

Urban Distribution Intl.

**IN BERLIN: MGB - Unifrance #35**

Paris - New York

14 rue du 18 août  
93100 Montreuil FRANCE  
Tel +33 1 48 70 46 56  
Fax +33 1 49 72 04 21  
[sales@urbandistrib.com](mailto:sales@urbandistrib.com)  
[www.urbandistrib.com](http://www.urbandistrib.com)  
webtv : [urbandistrib.tv](http://urbandistrib.tv)

DNY PRODUCTIONS



*avec le soutien de*  
la Région Île-de-France

 VOLVA FILMS



Film und Medien  
Stiftung Berlin



INSTITUT  
FRANÇAIS

la Francophonie



FILM  
FONDS

lam