



## EVENTS

# The Scent of Green Papaya (Mùi du du xanh)

### The Scent of Green Papaya (Mùi du du xanh)

Director: Trần Anh Hùng

©/Produced by: Les Productions Lazennec

©/In co-production with: SFP Cinéma,  
La Sept Cinéma

With the participation of: Canal+, CNC - Centre  
national de la cinématographie, Fondation Gan  
pour le Cinéma, Procirep

Executive Producer: Christophe Rossignon

Associate Producers: Adeline Lécallier, Alain Rocca

Production Manager: Eric Dangremont

1st Assistant Director: Nicolas Cambois

Screenplay: Trần Anh Hùng

Director of Photography: Benoît Delhomme

Editors: Nicole Dedieu, Jean-Pierre Roques

Set Designer: Alain Negre

Costumes: Jean-Philippe Abril, Danielle Laffargue

Original Music: Tôn Thất Tiết

Sound Mixer: Joël Faure

Sound Engineer: Michel Guiffan

Studio: SFP Studios (Bry-sur-Marne)

Cast:

Trần Nữ Yên Khê (*Mùi*, age 20)

Lu Man San (*Mùi*, age 10)

Trương Thị Lộc (*the mother*)

Nguyễn Anh Hoa (*old Thi*)

Vương Hoà Hối (*Khuyen*)

Trần Ngọc Trung (*the father*)

Van Thà (*Thu*)

Souvannavong Keo (*Trung*)

Nguyễn Văn Oanh (*Mr Thuan*)

Neth Gerard (*Tin*)

Do Nhat (*Lam*)

Võ Thị Hải (*the grandmother*)

Nguyễn Thị Thanh Trà (*Mai*)

Bùi Lâm Huy (*the doctor*)

Nguyễn Xuân Thu (*antique dealer*)

France 1992©

104 mins

35mm

The papaya is a fruit when ripe. When green it is considered a vegetable.

This is why the papaya is always planted behind the kitchen, in the vegetable garden, among the vegetable and culinary herbs.

It is never planted in the flower garden.

Green papaya comes to men on a plate, ready to be eaten.

But it is picked, washed, peeled and prepared by women.

This is why green papaya immediately evokes in me a world of gestures and attitudes of women's daily work.

The scent of green papaya is for me a childhood memory of maternal gestures.

Trần Anh Hùng

Trần Anh Hùng, born in Vietnam and educated in Paris, was inspired to become a filmmaker by the example of Lam Le, the pioneer French Vietnamese director, and he worked on Le's seminal *Dust of Empire*. Trần's two short films – *La Femme mariée de Nam Xuong* (1987) and *La Pierre de l'attente* (1991) – are both close in spirit to Le's film, but *The Scent of Green Papaya* picks up their elliptical narrative structures and their accumulation-of-details style and turns them into something distinct and underivative. This is a remarkably confident and achieved debut feature.

In part, the confidence must be related to the conditions of production. Trần was obliged to abandon his original plan to shoot in Vietnam and made the entire film instead in a studio at Bry-sur-Marne, a limitation that clearly meshed with the aesthetic decision to build the film from rigorously controlled patterns of salient detail. *Green Papaya* is analytic (and defiantly idiosyncratic) in structure, in ways that allow Trần to prevent the film from falling into the James Ivory trap of wallowing in nostalgia for more elegant times, but also allow him to stress the metaphorical dimension of Mùi's growth to maturity. He has described his film as an attempt to deal with 'the problem of servitude', especially as it affects Vietnamese women. Mùi's trajectory from naivety and wonderment through the inculcated routines of domestic labour to the subtler servitude of devotion to a man works as a doubled-edged metaphor.

In one way, this is an account of a Vietnamese woman achieving a kind of fulfilment: realising her own potential without remotely transcending her allotted social role. In another, Mùi's case is a cypher for a much larger social process: the shift from the countryside to cities, the developing sophistication and education, and then, inevitably, the 'westernisation', rendered here through the décor of Khuyen's house and the young musician's absorption in Debussy and Chopin. Both stages of this process find Mùi learning by example. First she learns the preparation of food (notably the chopping of papaya for salad) from Thi; then she learns to read from Khuyen. Trần uses images rather than words to underline his theme: both periods in Mùi's education are presented as patterns of gestures copied from the educator until perfected.

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Thu 8 Feb 18:20; Wed 28 Feb 20:40

**Preview: The Iron Claw**

Thu 8 Feb 20:35

**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**

Mon 12 Feb 18:30

**Preview: Getting It Back: The Story of Cymande + Q&A with Tim Mackenzie-Smith and Cymande, plus afterparty**

Tue 13 Feb 18:30

**Christopher Nolan in Conversation**

Thu 15 Feb 18:30

**Tenet + intro by director Christopher Nolan**

Thu 15 Feb 20:15 BFI IMAX

**Preview: Evil Does Not Exist** Aku wa sonzai shinai

Sat 17 Feb 18:00

**TV Preview: This Town + Q&A with Steven**

**Knight, cast members Michelle Dockery, Jordan**

**Bolger, Ben Rose and Levi Brown, director Paul**

**Whittington and executive producer Karen**

**Wilson**

Mon 26 Feb 18:15

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Metaphor apart, the film is overwhelmingly sensual in its depiction of its milieu. In part, this is a triumph for the cinematographer and art directors, who have recreated the light, the colours and the timbre of two Vietnamese houses in the studio with almost hallucinatory intensity. But it is also a triumph of Trân's own visual sensibility. The film alternates between huge close-up details (the middle son Lam tormenting ants on a window ledge, Mùì's finger probing the seed-pulp inside an unripe papaya) and extended wide-angle tracking shots through the houses, following the to-ings and fro-ings of the various characters and thus stressing the interconnectedness of the household routines. Both types of shot are used to focus on Mùì herself for much of the time, but both are also sometimes used to broaden the focus, acknowledging Mùì's place in a larger domestic and social fabric. The general sense of offscreen realities is amplified by the soundtrack, which contains occasional hints of the anti-colonial war then being fought in the faraway North.

There is sadly no real Vietnamese tradition for Trân to draw on in constructing his images and metaphors. Vietnamese film production dates back to the 1930s (when it was largely in the hands of Vietnamese-Chinese), but most production since the 1930s – including the communist government's propaganda output – has been locked into stale conventions of theatricality and melodrama. Implicitly acknowledging his own cultural identity as a westernised émigré artist, Trân has combined ideas and influences from both oriental and occidental sources to underpin his vision. The use of the studio and the *mise en scène* of tracking shots is indebted to western tradition, from von Sternberg to Bresson. The use of a small boy given to domestic mischief and provocative farting is a respectful nod to Ozu.

Trân insists that his future projects will be shot in Vietnam, and that they will deal with the country's present-day realities and problems; *Green Papaya* will be his only period movie, and it expresses things that he needed to get out of his system. It's hard to imagine what the film might mean to a Vietnamese audience, either in Vietnam or in the global diaspora, but its established success suggests that its central conundrum – the tangled lines between servitude and love – achieves a universality. Not bad for a first-time director far from home.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, April 1994