

# The Funny Side of the Vietnam War



Lights, camera, action: A night scene is shot in Bangkok. Opposite: Capturing the drama as MPs fire tear-gas into the Minh Ngoc bar.

*The first comedy film about the Vietnam war and another, in a thriller vein, were recently shot in Thailand, a favourite location for duplicating the Saigon backdrop. They will be released later this year, but will audiences — accustomed to so much heartbreak and drama from this era — be ready to accept such movies? Rick Fredericksen reports.*

**T**he US military's problems during the 1968 communist Tet offensive were large enough without having to deal with a drunken soldier in Saigon's girlie-bar district. But the commotion at the Minh Ngoc bar was escalating — the serviceman was AWOL and refused to come out. The MPs were about to fire tear-gas, when a voice screamed above the din: "Cut it! Print it! Perfect!"

Hollywood movie-makers were in Thailand and old Saigon was resurfacing throughout Bangkok as production designers recreated the war years for the big screen. Since 1975, when the real war ended, the film industry has been shaping the

historic war years into a major motion picture genre. It started in 1978 with the box office hit *The Deer Hunter* and peaked in 1987 when *Platoon* became another Oscar-winning story.

More than 20 Vietnam movies already have been released and others are about to be presented with a new menu of tantalising movie selections. Thailand has become a favourite location for duplicating the Vietnam backdrop and two movies filmed around Bangkok in recent months are a welcome sign that the Vietnam movie genre is maturing.

While reluctant to divulge too much about the movie plots, press agents are telling enough to reveal a fresh look at Viet-

nam. Some of today's scripts are avoiding violence on the battlefield, preferring instead to concentrate on the personalities and frustrations behind the front lines.

*Good Morning Vietnam* is the first comedy to be based on the Vietnam war. It stars the popular American comedian Robin Williams, who is best-known for his TV show *Mork and Mindy*. In addition, he has performed comic routines before live audiences and had parts in a number of other comedy movies. In a role that matches his real-life personality, Williams plays Adrian Cronauer, a zany disc jockey who entertains the troops on the American Forces Radio Service.

At 6 o'clock every morning, Cronauer signs on his radio programme and GIs from "the Delta to the DMZ" hear his greeting "Gooooood Morning Vietnam". The year is 1965, when Saigon was still the Pearl of the Orient before the big US troop build-up. Director Barry Levinson (*The Natural* and *Young Sherlock Holmes*) says he was attracted by the humour. "It's like all of a sudden we can begin to explore all the stories that were part of the Vietnam experience. It's not a crazy comedy or slapstick, but it has humour and doesn't deal with the soldier in terms of the fighting experience."

Adds Mark Johnson, the producer: "It

tells us something about the war I didn't know about. I don't see this as a Vietnam film. People remember *M\*A\*S\*H* for its comedy and some of its performances, and I think it's almost incidental that it happened to be during the Korean war."

Williams is not taking the role lightly. He has been reading the "Nam" and "Despatches", war diaries and listening to old AFRS tapes.

"Cronauer did some funny things and played rock and roll," Williams says. "And censorship was real. If a restaurant blew up and he made an announcement on the radio, they pulled him off the air." Williams says: "This human comedy is another way of dealing with a memory." Cronauer's Vietnamese friend is Tung Tranh Tran, who escaped from Vietnam in 1979 and now lives in Chicago. "I love it," the high school senior said when asked about the flurry of Vietnam movies, "but I prefer it to be not like the *Platoon* movie because it is so much about war, and I like the culture and actually the people and how they live." But Tran's character turns out to be a Viet Cong, and he says he "feels uncomfortable" playing that role.

As the first Vietnam comedy, *Good Morning Vietnam* will be risky with American audiences. Are they ready to laugh about such a sensitive subject? Has enough time passed?

"I hope so," says Williams. "How long was it before they made *Hogan's Heroes*? — an American TV comedy about the lives of POWs in a Nazi prison camp. When is it time? I hope now."

Producer Johnston says the question will be answered on a mass basis when the film hits the screens later this year. *Saigon*, the other Vietnam movie made in Thailand, also ignores the predictable battle-field scenes. It stars one of the hottest properties in Hollywood, Willem Dafoe, who was nominated for best supporting actor for his performance in *Platoon*.

"I didn't want to go back to Vietnam, that's for sure," Dafoe admits, "but I was really struck by the script. A great action film. Great thriller, and it has a little romance."

Dafoe is an army plainclothes detective in the CID (Criminal Investigation Detachment). Christopher Crowe, writer and director, calls it "a cop picture with a twist. The army is investigating a murder. The internal dynamics are in the vein of *The French Connection* or *Bullitt*".

While *Saigon* is not a Vietnam movie as such, Crowe says he set it in Saigon "because it's fertile for exploration. Also, war settings have been a staple of American film diet for years and years and it has been years since that staple has been on the market. So I think there will be a resurgence of this kind of picture and it will go on for some time before it runs its course".

Co-star Gregory Hines is among the actors caught up in the public's preoccupation with the Vietnam era. "Maybe the time has come when people are less uptight about the mention of the war and maybe

there's a generation now that wants to know really what went down," says Hines, whose best-known roles were in *White Nights* and *Cotton Club*.

The success of *Platoon* and the criticism that it over-emphasises the American brutality during the war, are pursuing Dafoe on the set of *Saigon*.

"I'm aware some veterans, especially on the political right, maybe didn't care for *Platoon*. But my experience with the veterans I've met has shown a pretty much positive effect. People empathise with them without judgement. Before, there was a terrific judgement about the awful things that went on there. Now, those judgements are recognised, but not pinned. Veterans have been freed of the label of lepers."

Dafoe says he was not trying to do another *Platoon* by starring in *Saigon*. "You don't grind away at something that has been real satisfying for you. I still maintain above all that it's a strong script, a colourful action story."

Twentieth Century Fox is behind this first Vietnam cop show, which is due in the theatres early next year. And while the studios will have to wait for box office receipts, millions of dollars already have poured into Bangkok's economy. Thailand has come of age in the film industry and can now offer experienced local staffers to help arrange difficult shooting assignments far away from the executive offices in California. Director Crowe says not

only can old Saigon be duplicated well in Bangkok, but "there have been two major films produced there and that always paves the way for others. There are technologies as a result of *Killing Fields* and *The Deer Hunter* and with that comes know-how".

Crowe predicts that Thailand will become a world-class production centre if the Vietnam craze continues. The Philippines also is a favoured location for filming Indochina pictures, including *Platoon*.

Mark Johnson says Thailand was elected for *Good Morning Vietnam* because the production designer worked there on *Killing Fields* and because of concern over the political situation in the Philippines. As for shooting in Hollywood, Johnson says: "Sets would cost millions upon millions. It's totally unrealistic."

Advance teams of scouts and designers arrived in Thailand long before cameras were unloaded. From casting to carpentry, the pre-shooting was coordinated between Hollywood and Bangkok. When the stars finally arrived for a night sequence in *Saigon*, a narrow street hidden in Bangkok had been mocked-up to look like a back street in old Saigon.

Production designer Dennis Washington says: "Hopefully, you won't learn about a lot of the things we've done. Obviously, we erected the John Wayne billboard and we painted a Coke sign then aged it down."

The Minh Ngoc Bar is actually a little ▶



Photos: Rick Fredericksen



Professional tip: Thai soliders give actor Robin Williams some close-order drill during location shooting.

## FUNNY SIDE OF WAR

food store operated by a Thai family. After negotiating a fair price, workmen turned it into a GI bar, complete with American flags, jukebox and a neon sign that reads "cocktail lounge".

With nearly three million US military personnel having served duty in Vietnam, there will be many experts in the audience. Authenticity was an important factor for both *Good Morning Vietnam* and *Saigon*, especially the military detail: jungle boots and helmets, M-16s and deuce-and-a-half (2½-ton) trucks... all genuine.

There may have been some imperfections in the custom-made Vietnamese-language signs, but the technical staff deserve high marks for recreating the little blue and yellow taxis that long-legged GIs used to cram themselves into. The old-model Renaults have disappeared from the streets of the southern Vietnamese capital, but a fleet of fibre-glass replicas has been seen on both movie locations in Thailand.

As the film caravans travel from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, Thai families lease their homes or shops for use of the bathrooms for the crew, or to make 'phone calls or shoot interiors. *Good Morning Vietnam* has so many crew and extras that large meeting halls were rented out for lunch rooms. Selecting the best location goes beyond the physical texture of

the community. Many Thais were hired as extras for the Minh Ngoc bar scene.

"We chose this Chinese-Thai neighbourhood to get the look consistent with the Vietnamese look — the fair-skinned look," explains assistant director Phil Cunningham. A few Thais harbouring traditional animosity toward the Vietnamese, refused to wear Vietnamese-style conical hats and full-length *Ou Dai* dresses. Others think it is funny and make jokes.

One Thai extra, who normally cooks and sells food items from her home, holds no prejudice at all when it comes to earning US\$16 a night. "I'm one of the Vietnamese women who've been asked to run back and forth in the gunfire," she laughs.

A bigger problem is getting enough extras to play GIs, especially since two movies were being shot at the same time and competing for the same limited pool of black and white men living there. Casting directors posted signs in hotels and guesthouses and other places where tourists gathered.

A large percentage of extras are travelers. European and Australian men were fitted out in US army uniforms, but were not given speaking roles because of their accents. John McGordy, from Cleveland, Ohio, is a US\$36-a-day "military policeman" who has been on the road for three years. "I just get jobs as I travel. Last night I was guarding this bar, waiting to shoot."

The most serious shortage is in blacks. One assistant says "everyone knows they did a lot of fighting and they want to reflect that in the films". Jubreel Tokunbo Pole volunteered to be a movie soldier while on vacation from Nigeria, in West Africa. Gulping down orange juice in the midday sun, Jubreel complained the work was not easy. But every extra likes to watch himself in a movie.

One Thai movie star landed a major role in *Good Morning Vietnam*. Teen idol Jintara Sukhapat plays Robin Williams' Vietnamese sweetheart. It's the first international performance for the 22-year-old actress, who has squeezed 15 Thai movies into her brief career and already has won an award for best actress. Williams says: "She's done more movies in two years than I'll do in a lifetime. She's teaching me some Thai and I'm teaching her some Californian."

Crowd control presents special problems in Bangkok, a city where traffic is difficult to negotiate at the best of times. Closing off streets and holding back onlookers requires delicate treatment, especially when the trucks, vans, heavy equipment and demanding directors take over someone's neighbourhood.

Phil Cunningham, who speaks Thai, acts as buffer between the *Saigon* intruders and local residents. "I've just returned from working with Spielberg on *Empire of the Sun*, set in Shanghai," he said. "We ▶

## FUNNY SIDE OF WAR

had days with 5,000 people out in the streets, but because China is such a disciplined society, the Chinese authorities had nearly total control. Thailand is a little more of a challenge because the people are free. You have to have a sense of humour. The crowd is well-behaved, polite and quiet. We prefer to handle the crowd ourselves rather than have the police do it, because we like to keep the people on our side and make it fun for them."

The locals appear to be more helpful than harmful, keeping their food stands open and selling drinks, poking their heads through windows and joking with the cast and crew during breaks. When the crew turned Bangkok's Patpong bar district into Saigon's Tu Do Street, there was a constant crowd of the curious, but the tedious pace of takes and re-takes was no competition for the tourist delights upstairs or down the street.

The celebrated Thai hospitality seemed to have won over both movie companies, but the ultimate compliment came from Mark Johnson who said it was one of his more pleasant movie-making experiences. The only problems seem to have been brought on by the movie-makers themselves. They decided to shoot at the same time and during the most stifling weather — between the hot season and the monsoon season. Daytime temperatures of 37C



Teen idol Jintara Sukhapat: Her first international role.

(99F) were common. Frequent afternoon rains interrupted the schedule. "One minute the sky is full of sunshine, then all of a sudden things are floating away," one actor joked.

A boardroom drama has been played out behind the scenes of several Vietnam movies. These have involved private meetings with the communist government of Hanoi and political sensitivities associated with the United States Government. The most touchy issue concerned filming in Ho Chi Minh City, the new name for Saigon. No American cinematographer had shot there since communist tanks rolled into the city in April 1975. Previously only news photographers had been allowed in, but the Vietnamese appear ready

to welcome a movie crew. After negotiating for two months with the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok, director Crowe said: "They've allowed us to shoot as much or as little of the picture as we like. They've been quite cordial, actually, and seem very interested in doing commerce with the Americans."

But whether 20th Century Fox will take up the offer is another question.

Relations between Washington and Hanoi have been cool since the end of the Indochina war and are further complicated by the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the issue of American servicemen still unaccounted for.

Mark Johnston, producer of *Good Morning Vietnam*, says: "We explored shooting in Vietnam but the Disney studio would not go for it at all." He said Vietnam was a country "we were at war with very recently and the conservative Disney studio would not want to face stockholders over this sensitive area".

In the meantime, the cameras are trained on Thailand. Several more Vietnam movies are in the works and a Canadian production, *The Laughing War*, was scheduled to begin shooting there this summer. So whether you have had a fill of Vietnam, or crave more, there's little to stop the coming wave of the latest film genre. With two Vietnam movies having already taken Oscars for best film, the light at the end of this tunnel is from a movie projector. □



Recreating the past: Fibre-glass replicas of the old blue and yellow Renault taxis that plied Saigon streets were constructed for this scene duplicating old Saigon.