

## Making waves



### Wave Releasing

UNIVERSAL MESSAGE: Gauger's "Owl and the Sparrow," a love story set in modern-day Vietnam, features Le The Lu, Pham Thi Han and Cat Ly.

Wave Releasing, a start-up of Vietnamese American filmmakers, aims to find a wider outlet for their out-of-the-mainstream voices.

By My-Thuan Tran  
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Writer-director Stephane Gauger had high hopes for his debut feature, "Owl and the Sparrow," shot on the busy streets of Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnamese-language film, about an orphan who plays matchmaker to a lonely zookeeper and a flight attendant, blazed through the 2007 film festival circuit, snagging awards and accolades in the Hollywood Reporter and Variety.

Winning the Crystal Heart Award at the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis was a watershed for the filmmakers, signifying that their subtitled film reached beyond the confines of Vietnamese enclaves like Orange County's Little Saigon.

"It was huge when it won an award in a festival that represents Middle America," said executive producer Timothy Bui. "That told us that this film can succeed in the mainstream market, not just for Vietnamese audiences."

But finding a company to distribute the film to American theaters was another matter. Gauger and Bui wanted to market the film to both Vietnamese and mainstream audiences but had a difficult time finding a distributor who knew how to tap into Vietnamese communities. "We had

a few meetings, and we kept hearing, 'We love the movie, but we don't know how to market it,' " Bui said. "They weren't convinced Vietnamese Americans would come out and watch it."

Frustrated, Gauger and Bui finally decided they would have to do things themselves and created their own distribution company with a few Vietnamese American filmmakers. Their company -- the first of its kind for Vietnamese Americans -- is called Wave Releasing.

"Owl" will debut in seven cities nationwide this month, mostly in areas with large Vietnamese populations, and is booked locally at West Hollywood's Laemmle Sunset 5 and in Orange County at the Regal Garden Grove 16 and Irvine Edwards Westpark 8. Wave partners hope the film eventually lands in front of art-house audiences in New York, Chicago and Seattle as well.

With a newly minted niche distribution company, the filmmakers are hoping to create a space where Vietnamese pictures can thrive, inside and outside Vietnamese enclaves.

"Our success as artists is usually confined to pockets of San Jose, Houston and Orange County. Once you travel beyond the borders of the Vietnamese community, our voices are mute, silent," said Bui, who co-wrote 1999's "Three Seasons," one of the first films shot in Vietnam by a Vietnamese American, and wrote and directed 2001's "Green Dragon," with Patrick Swayze and Forest Whitaker, about South Vietnamese who landed in the tent city at Camp Pendleton. "That's when we said, 'Wait a minute, we have to create a platform that gives Vietnamese artists a voice.' "

In the last few years, Vietnamese American cinema has evolved in terms of storytelling and technical sophistication. More Vietnamese American directors are making feature films, such as Ham Tran's 2006 "Journey From the Fall," which told the plight of a South Vietnamese family after the 1975 fall of Saigon and premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. "There is a movement of Vietnamese filmmakers that are raising the quality of film and storytelling that's no longer just made for Vietnamese people," said Tran, a Wave Releasing partner.

The recent surge of award-winning, feature-length films made by Vietnamese American directors has even gained a moniker -- the "Viet film wave," from which Wave Releasing got its name. The movement parallels the coming of age of second-generation Vietnamese Americans. Gauger, Bui and Tran were born in Vietnam but immigrated to the United States as children after the 1975 fall of Saigon. The three, based in Los Angeles, have worked on one another's films and those of other Vietnamese filmmakers.

But early successes were often met with obstacles: "The Rebel," a martial-arts action flick directed and written by Charlie Nguyen, was a box-office hit in Vietnam. But the movie, acquired by the Weinstein Co., was shuttled straight to DVD in the States.

"It was a pity that there wasn't Wave Releasing around when Charlie needed it for the film," said Tran, who edited "Rebel."

A made-for-Vietnamese distribution company was the obvious next step, Gauger said. They believed "Owl's" sweet, quirky love story set in modern-day Vietnam had crossover appeal with

its universal message of hope.

These Vietnamese filmmakers are following in the footsteps of others who have formed their own distribution companies to market niche films, said Mike Vollman, president of marketing for United Artists. He has seen distribution companies created by Latino, Indian, East Asian, Christian groups and others increasingly pop up. Some, he said, have been able to propel their films to the weekend list of 10 top-grossing movies.

Success for smaller distribution companies relies on building strong buzz with a grass-roots release, helped along by a strong Internet presence, Vollman said.

"The Internet has evened the playing field," Vollman said. "It's much easier for these companies to narrowcast, to have a well-defined marketing plan and hit the niche consumers hard."

The seven-screen release for Owl is modest compared with big-time foreign films that can open in more than a dozen cities in the U.S., but their goal for a \$10,000 per-screen-average is "a very respectable goal for a small independent film without the big marketing dollars," Gauger said.

With a budget of less than \$100,000 for "Owl," much less than what other distribution companies typically put out, the team decided to forgo traditional marketing tactics such as newspaper advertisements for a more grass-roots strategy. They have edited a trailer, designed fliers and hung up posters themselves. "It's mostly sweat equity," Bui said.

Wave is projecting that a strong opening in Orange County and Los Angeles will create enough buzz to propel theaters in more cities to carry the film. But success in Southern California hinges largely on luring Vietnamese American audiences who do not have a track record of showing up to the movies and prefer waiting for DVDs, said Nguyen Tran, Wave's sales director.

Wave partners believe "Owl," what Gauger calls a "love letter to Saigon," could be the film that turns the tide. And, they say, who better to market to Orange County's Little Saigon, home to about 150,000 Vietnamese Americans, than the filmmakers who grew up there?

"If we went to a normal distribution company with 'Owl' or future films, they wouldn't know how to tap into Vietnamese student association groups. They wouldn't know how to tap into all the Vietnamese radio outlets," Gauger said. "Their basic release would be to get good reviews and that's not enough."

Wave launched an aggressive campaign in Little Saigon, supplementing traditional Vietnamese language radio and newspaper spots with flashy advertisements for "Owl" printed on paper place mats, ubiquitous in Little Saigon's noodle houses. To target younger Vietnamese audiences, they released four short viral videos on YouTube, featuring Vietnamese celebrities like reality TV seductress Tila Tequila and funnyman Dat Phan from NBC's "Last Comic Standing."

In radio interviews, Wave partners stressed that coming out to see "Owl" is more than just watching a movie, it's about supporting Vietnamese artists, Nguyen Tran said.