Documenting our community

By Ashley Truong

Photos courtesy of Christopher Woon

What do Hmong b-boys and first-generation Japanese immigrants have in common? Not much, unless they're both subjects of documentaries.

UCLA alumnus Christopher Woon's feature documentary Among B-Boys is a look at the world of break dancing through the eyes of Hmong youth from California's Central Valley. The documentary is an expansion of Woon's 2004 short film, which he produced with the Armed with a Camera Fellowship. The Fellowship is part of Visual Communications, the longest running community-based arts organization for Asian American and Pacific Island media.

Visual Communications, located in Los Angeles, was founded in 1970 by UCLA professor Robert A. Nakamura. Nakamura, who began his career as a photojournalist, turned to documentary-making during the 1960s civil rights movement as a form of social change. Nakamura says, "Part of the movement [was the idea of] creating community. Another idea was serving community...We kind of adapted that to say, 'Let's use media to serve the community." Noticing the dearth of archived information about the Asian American community's history, Nakamura began to gather his own information, in order to create and preserve that history.

According to Nakamura, there are three principle things documentarians need to do in order to serve the community: document, preserve, and present. Many stereotypes about Asian Americans are based on what they look like, so profiling the community visually is necessary to refute those stereotypes. Unfortunately, the Asian American community--and most communities of color--are not documented, and the information disappears. That's why Nakamura turned to making documentaries, and why he founded Visual Communications. "If no one else is [documenting the Asian American community] we need to do it ourselves."

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EthnoCommunications class, producing and directing Among B-Boys was a way to document the story of Hmong b-boys. But it was also an attempt to understand and justify his own involvement in hip hop, a movement seen as primarily African American to mainstream America. Woon heard about crews of Hmong b-boys in the Central Valley area from his roommates, and became interested in why they were involved with the hip hop movement.

"Maybe that could answer for me 'Why do I like it?'" he said.

Visibility for Asian American b-boys has been increasing, Woon said, and this visibility has helped challenge stereotypes about the Asian American community. For many of the Hmong b-boys in Woon's documentary, however, it is still difficult justifying their involvement in hip hop to their family. Many of their parents push education as a means of success, and associate breakdancing with gang culture. But Woon thinks that making and presenting Among B-Boys is a way for these parents to see break dancing differently, and for Hmong youth to validate their involvement in it. Ultimately, for Woon, as for Nakamura, making documentaries is about the community and social change. Although the seven years it took to make Among B-Boys were often challenging, Woon was encouraged by the b-boys in his documentary to continue because they felt that it was important for themselves and their families. "It's sharing stories," Woon said. "There's something about sharing stories... that connects people. It builds a sense of community. It doesn't necessarily have to have a political drive to it." For Woon and for Nakamura, building community is important because it allows people to feel a resonance with strangers' stories, and to create a sense of solidarity.

Photo courtesy of Adam Rose

The past and future of the classic film

By: Ray Luo

Turner Classic Movies' second annual Classic Film Festival is a movie-lover's dream come true, and Asian American viewers and talent are taking notice.

Classic Film Festival is a celebration of newly restored Hollywood and foreign classics, complete with discussions with filmmakers and performers who can illuminate the times and situations surrounding the creation o f various featured films. On Friday, April 29, Kirk Douglas was in person to talk with host Robert Osborne about the production of "Spartacus."

Clips from Douglas's One-Man Show were shown on the big screen. In that clip, the older Kirk Douglas tells the younger Kirk Douglas to go away when it is revealed that he is just too haughty. Douglas and Osborne were a delight for all, including a sizeable crowd of Asian and Asian American viewers.

"The presence of movie directors and moviemakers gave us a great insight into the [the ways movies are made], from the original idea to the final product," said Ting Liu, an exchange student from Hong Kong at UCLA who attended the film fest for the first time. "It was a delight to see some of the great works in the movie [genre] for the first time."

Liu and the audience were sent into riotous laughter following a description of a the scene in "Goldfinger." In particular, Meskin's retelling of the moment where, feeling the need for "man talk" with Felix Leiter, his British colleague, Sean Connery slaps the buttock of a lady with whom he was intimate.

Liu referred to one of the moviemakers Warren Beatty, whose conversation with Alec Baldwin was one of the highlights of the festival. During that discussion following a showing of the very long film, "Reds," Beatty joked that he only agreed to participate because Baldwin had agreed to star in Beatty's next film; a four hour and twenty-five minute vehicle with two characters, both played by Baldwin, who was to work without pay.

One of the most insightful topics to come up during the conversation is the nature of directing oneself when one is also the lead performer in a film.

"It can't be done," said Beatty, the 1981 Academy Award-winning director of Reds; a film about Communist activist and journalist John Silas "Jack" Reed. "Because the job is to be out of control, as an actor, but the job of the director is to be in control. A little bit out of control of [being] in control because you want to go with the actor, and the actor has to be a little bit in control of being out of control."

Aspiring filmmakers beware next time a small budget calls for putting oneself in film.

“Character is plot,” said Beatty, who applauded Diane Keaton’s performance as the personality who formed the plot. “I would not have made the movie without her, or would have made an entirely different film.”

Baldwin, the host, was impeccable. One of his most provocative questions was how Beatty’s relationship with the woman in the film affects the filming process.

“It’s very hard to meet someone [for the first time on film] you already know [personally],” said Beatty, who elicited a gasp of profundity from the crowd.

For Asian filmmakers and audiences, the festival was a gem of insight into the workings of the Hollywood industry, as well as into some of the most influential filmmakers and performers who ever graced Hollywood.

“As Asian Americans, we will be able to make use of the media to voice out our stories and thoughts,” said Ting. “It is an introduction to the classics of the past adapted to [our digital age].”

Even in showing his most acclaimed work, Beatty forecasts the future of movie-making and movie-watching. What do Beatty and Baldwin think are on the horizon? Variable ticket pricing and watching “Lawrence of Arabia” on one’s iPod.

“The car chases used to require a buildup,” said Beatty, who describes a different way of filmmaking for our more demanding current times. “Now if there’s a buildup to a car chase, you go to the refrigerator–there is no captive audience.”

For Asian Americans at the forefront of the digital revolution, the classics cannot be ignored. They teach us what we need to know about filmmaking and reveal how the ways of the past will be applied to the films of the future.

Photo courtesy of Mathieu Young

Photo courtesy of Adam Rose