

How to Make a Film and Enrich Your Life **Brendan McNerney**

“It was like entering a movie that just never ended.”

-Tony Bui, Alumnus and Director of Green Dragon on his years at LMU

To say that Tony Bui loved movies is akin to saying that the sky is blue: it's indisputable. From the earliest moments of his childhood to his revelatory first steps on campus, his intent was clear: "...it was literally 24-7, I wanted to study film, eat film, live film." At LMU, Bui's fervor for personal exploration through film was supported by the faculty of the School of Film and Television who saw a young man, full of ambition, ready to be coaxed out of his shell. Years later and working in the film industry, his memories of LMU and its impact on his life have not been diminished with the passing time. He often finds himself reflecting on what he gained at the university:

“...sometimes you get burnt out or whatever... but I think back to these days when I just came in; that kid, that fire in the belly, anything was possible. I try to tap into my time here at Loyola to literally renew myself, re-strengthen myself in my work today. That's really a testament of how special my time here was.”

Tony Bui's success and experience are hardly exceptions to the rule. He proves to be but a single, poignant example of how the faculty, and perhaps even LMU itself, refused to give up on a student, demanding that he strive to attain his dreams, even before he knew where to look.

It all began when Tony was a sophomore in high school in Northern California. As if out of no where, he suddenly decided that he was going to become a filmmaker. This decision was initially met with skepticism by his family. According to Bui, the general consensus was that “you can't go and study film. That's something you watch for the fun of it.” His infatuation with cinema, however, could not be deterred. He was so dedicated to the cause that when his parents sent him to L.A. to tour colleges, he went under the pretense of being an engineering major in order to get his chance to explore the film schools in the area. He debated where he might apply and which school would be best suited to foster his secret love. His final choices boiled down to a battle between USC and LMU. As history would show, his hopes for “an environment where [he] felt like a part of the community” did not lead him to USC.

Once at LMU, Tony dove into the culture and was surprised he was so quickly accepted. There was no ostracism, there was no posturing, but rather a palpable sense of camaraderie guided by an experienced and enthusiastic faculty that got as much enjoyment from teaching as they did from film. He commented on the inclusive community stating, “So you got to know everyone, be really close to everyone, so by the time you [made] your own movie, you [had] a whole network of people to help you out.” That mentorship, both by peers and faculty, led him to create a junior thesis film that was all about style, filled to the brim with slow motion shoot-em-ups and guns blazing.

But he was dissatisfied with his work. He wanted his senior thesis film to be more potent, to have a sense of worth that he felt was lacking in his previous effort. Again, the support for his project never wavered for an instant and his new direction towards more humanistic and socially relevant filmmaking was met with congratulations. He attributed this newfound desire for profundity to the campus itself: “...I wanted to say something. And that was in part because of

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being here at Loyola and watching all these amazing movies that had a social consciousness.” LMU continually pushed its students with its mission statement to pursue an education of the whole person and the film school proved to be no exception. So when Tony walked in to his advisors during his senior year and said that he wanted to go to Vietnam, the country of his birth, to make a movie, the only reply he was given was “Yes.”

In particular, Tony’s passion captivated one professor, Ian Connor, who would shepherd him along and safeguard the project every step of the way. Whenever Tony met with a roadblock for funding or needed assistance in developing the project further, Professor Connor was there, escorting him to each department and ensuring that every possible demand was met. Tony described Connor simply as “that one professor who’s really odd and says the craziest things, but [in the end] had the most impact on the students.” With a stalwart supporter behind him and his affairs arranged, Tony travelled to Vietnam where he would have his most life-changing experience yet.

Arriving in 1994, Tony had to deal immediately with the fact that Vietnam was under Communist control and that diplomatic relations with the United States had yet to be resolved. In order to approve the film, the Vietnamese government required written proof that Tony’s piece was, in fact, a school endeavor and not a slander piece against the country. Again, LMU pulled through for him, sending dozens of letters from an assortment of faculty that assured the Vietnamese officials that this was not only a student project, but also one “that would help foster relations and build bridges” long before the federal government could. With the final technicalities of the experience taken care of, Tony immersed himself in the culture he had left when he was two years old.

The film Tony Bui made in Vietnam was *Yellow Lotus*, which followed one farmer, Tran, who was thrust into a new life where it was permissible to own a business and your own land. The film dealt with the culture shock of that transition as a man of the fields was brought into the urban world of business management and commerce in a country that paradoxically embraced communism and a form of pseudo-capitalism. It represented Tony’s first attempt to speak to the international community through film and communicate a real message to the world. All of this was a product of his studies at LMU and the effect of completing this first film was undeniably life-changing: “I’ve always said that [making *Yellow Lotus*] changed the books I would read, changed the movies I would watch... I was on a different path, not only as an artist, but as a human being.”

The impact of the film was not lost on those in the industry. *Yellow Lotus* was screened at Telluride Film Festival. There, the film garnered immense praise and became one of the most talked about films at the festival. From Telluride, the rollercoaster went rocketing on through dozens of noteworthy film festivals, from Sundance to Aspen. Just out of college, Tony was already roping in investors to make his next film, *Three Seasons*. Following the success of that film, he chose to once again visit Vietnam in a story about immigration that he co-wrote with his brother called *Green Dragon*.

Success had embraced Tony Bui, but he never forgot the people or the place that catapulted him into his own personal limelight. The deeply-felt connections to LMU still

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occupied him. He spoke repeatedly about how important LMU was to him: “I get asked a lot in film festivals whether going to film school is important. For some people, it may not be. For me, it was crucial... it put me in an environment that I didn’t know was possible, but I needed, so it was like being in a dream world for years.”

Tony continues to work prolifically in the industry and he has only inspired things to say about LMU’s effect on his life. He contends that without the force of LMU behind him and his school-sponsored trip to Vietnam, he would never have found the voice that he so richly desired. In many ways, his experiences at the university were transformative and guided him to a new understanding of himself and the world that he can continually reflect on. His final thoughts on LMU were succinct yet insightful:

“It’s harder to search for as you get older and work in the business. It becomes much more about the business side and the money side and things like that. Magic is something you chase after and don’t always get. But when you’re in film school, your only obligation is to do what you love.”

As Tony continues to do what he loves every year, each new generation passing through LMU finds a similar system of support that encourages them to seek things they never thought possible and to test themselves beyond their supposed potential. That everlasting sense of support can be found in every corner, building and office on campus and all it takes is another passionate spirit like Tony Bui to find it.