

Being With a Friend: The Films of Edward Yang



Edward Yang (1947 – 2007) is probably best known for **A One and a Two...** (Yi Yi, 2000), the film that brought him won him the prize of **Best Director** in Cannes and international recognition. When he spoke of the film there he said ‘I’d have to consider the film a failure if people came away with the impression of having encountered “a filmmaker”. I’d like them to come away with the feeling of having been with a friend.’ He could have said the same about of any of his films – he was a deeply humane and intuitive observer of lives, loves and fears of people and the changing history of Taiwan. From 23 September a retrospective of his films will screen at **BFI Southbank**, allowing UK audiences the first opportunity to review all of his films, in the cinema, since his death.

Yang was born in Shanghai and raised in Taipei; his parents fled from China to Taiwan after the communist victory in the civil war in 1949. He loved films, and comics, from a young age, but studied computer design (part of the first generation to do so) in the US; he was accepted by the Harvard Architectural School, but declined his place, and even received a Masters Degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Florida, but hankered to make films.

Two things tipped the balance of his career; one was seeing Herzog’s *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and the other was the invitation to write a script for a friend, which took him back to Taiwan. Soon after he was directing for TV and then for cinema, and he never looked back.

His first break came when he wrote and directed the short **Desires**, one component of **In Our Time** (*Guangyin de Gushi*, 1981), which would be deemed as the arrival of Taiwan’s ‘new wave’. What followed was his elegant debut feature **That Day, at the Beach** (*Haitan de Yi Tian*, 1982), which also provided **Christopher Doyle** with his first feature as cinematographer, and then **Taipei Story** (*Qingmei Zhuma*, 1985), arguably the first of his masterpieces and starring fellow director **Hou Hsiao-Hsien**. He would draw on personal experiences for his films - the murder and gang fights against a backdrop of Elvis Presley in **A Brighter Summer Day** (*Guling Jie Shaonian Sharen Shijian*, 1991) are based on memories from his teenage years. He also used satire to explore the differences between the old and new images of Taipei in **A Confucian Confusion** (*Duli Shidai*, 1994), and between the old and young generations in **Mahjong** (*Majiang*, 1996). *A One and a Two...* his magnum opus, studies almost every aspect of modern life, but whether he’s staging momentous turning-points in

the lives of his characters or satirising the latest cultural fad, Yang maintained a balance between analysis and empathy. It stood him in good stead in life, and it made his films peerless.

Programme:

Shake and Bake: An Introduction to the Cinema of Edward Yang

Edward Yang is thought of as one of the founders of the 'Taiwan New Wave', but in fact he stood somewhat apart from most of his contemporaries and peers. This talk, illustrated with film clips (some of them rare), will explore the particular qualities of Yang's cinema and examine why and how Yang was unique. The speaker, Tony Rayns, subtitled Yang's last four films and recorded a commentary track with Yang for the UK/US DVD releases of *A One* and *a Two*...

Tickets £5

Fri 23 Sept 18:10 NFT3

In Our Time Guangyin de Gushi

Taiwan 1981. Co-dir Jim Tao, Ke Yizheng & Zhang Yi With Shi Anni, Wang Qiguang, Sylvia Chang 106min EST

Yang's movie debut was the episode *Desires* in this portmanteau feature, designed by its producers to introduce new talent and widely seen as the harbinger of Taiwan's 'new wave'. The four stories are unrelated, but the ensemble sets out to reflect two decades of social change. Yang's story, set in the dark 1960s, explores a schoolgirl's hopeless crush on the family's lodger – an early draft of the coming-of-age problems found in his later films.

Fri 23 Sept 20:40 NFT3, Sun 2 Oct 15:15 NFT2

That Day, at the Beach Haitan de Yi Tian

Taiwan-Hong Kong 1982. With Sylvia Chang, Hu Yinmeng, Mao Xuwei. 167min. EST

Yang's first feature (also Chris Doyle's as cinematographer) centres on conversations between two women, their lives both scarred by one domineering patriarch. Revealed in flashbacks, the plot turns on thwarted desires and failed relationships; there's also an Antonioni-esque disappearance on a beach. Visually elegant, the film is perfectly poised between sensitivity to the plights of the women and an entire history of generational change.

Sun 25 Sept 15:00 NFT2, Wed 28 Sept 19:50 NFT2

Taipei Story Qingmei Zhuma

Taiwan 1985. With Cai Qin, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Ke Yizheng, Wu Nien-Jen. 105min. EST

The first of Yang's masterpieces uses one failing relationship as a key to much larger questions about attitudes to life in the late 20th century. A modern-minded woman executive (played by singer Cai Qin) has long been engaged to a more backward-looking guy (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, truly a *mensch*), but they're rapidly growing apart. The great performances and a matchless eye for telling detail coalesce into piercingly moving cinema.

Sun 25 Sept 18:30 NFT2, Mon 26 Sept 20:50 NFT1

The Terrorisers Kongbufenzi

Taiwan-Hong Kong 1986. With Cora Miao, Wang An, Li Liquan, Jin Shijie. 108min. EST

The script brilliantly dovetails several strands of plot. A delinquent Eurasian girl, locked up by her mother, makes prank calls. One is received by a woman novelist, who takes it to mean that her husband is having an affair. Her husband, a lab technician, is meanwhile fighting a losing battle for promotion at work. In stunning images, Yang analyses the old and new ways we hurt each other – and the way that fiction itself works.

Sun 25 Sept 20:45 NFT3, Sat 1 Oct 17:50 NFT2

A Brighter Summer Day Guling Jie Shaonian Sharen Shijian

Taiwan-Japan 1991. With Chang Chen, Lisa Yang, Chang Kuo-Chu, Alex Yang. 237min + interval. EST.

Drawing on childhood memories of a teenage murder, Yang's *magnum opus* recreates the Taipei milieu in which he grew up: the discovery of Elvis Presley, fights between rival gangs from different social and political backgrounds, the nightmare of the anti-communist 'White Terror'. It has a

novelistic density of incident, a gallery of sublime performances and glorious moments of humour – all to show how and why one boy's life was ruined.

Sat 24 Sept 15:20 NFT1, Thu 29 Sept 18:30 NFT1

Mahjong Majiang

Taiwan 1996. With *Virginie Ledoyen, Chang Chen, Tang Congsheng, Wu Nien- Jen*. 121min. EST.

Yang's wonderful 'dark comedy' re-imagines the thrills and spills of *A Brighter Summer Day* for the new reality of a media-driven world. Its central characters are an absconding business magnate, a French teenager who's looking for the English guy who said he loved her, a boy who isn't sure if he should love or kill his father, and a gang of unruly kids. It covers a lot of social and moral ground on the way to its tremulously sweet conclusion.

Tue 27 Sept 17:45 NFT3, Sat 1 Oct 20:10 NFT2

A Confucian Confusion Duli Shidai

Taiwan 1994. With *Chen Xiangqi, Ni Shujun, Wang Weiming, Chen Yiwen*. 132min. EST.

A panoramic social satire, rooted in the clash between Taipei's image of itself as a cutting-edge 21st-century city and the deeply conservative (Confucian) values upon which the whole edifice rests. A large ensemble (several of them Yang's former students) acts out droll vignettes from the worlds of arts sponsorship, avant-garde theatre, high finance and local government. Despite the sometimes lacerating humour and pacing, it's often oddly touching.

Sun 2 Oct 17:40 NFT2, Thu 6 Oct 20:40 NFT2

A One and a Two... Yi Yi

Taiwan-Japan 2000. With *Wu Nien-Jen, Elaine Jin, Issei Ogata, Kelly Lee*. 173min. EST.

Yang's crowning achievement looks at the life of one family. NJ is a partner in a failing software firm which might just save itself by teaming up with 'visionary' Japanese game-designer. His wife has gone off to follow a dubious guru, his daughter is getting her first, rough lessons in love, his young son is asking difficult questions... and his mother-in-law is in a coma after a stroke. Much of modern life is here, observed with infinite humanity.

Wed 5 Oct 19:50 NFT1, Sun 9 Oct 19:40 NFT1

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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