

# THE THIRD WIFE

A FILM BY ASH MAYFAIR

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NEW DIRECTORS  
FESTIVAL DE SAN SEBASTIAN  
2018

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International  
Film Festival 2018

MAYFAIR PICTURES AN NAM PRODUCTIONS AND THREE COLORS PRODUCTIONS PRESENT "THE THIRD WIFE" TRAN NU YEN KHE NGUYEN PHUONG TRA MY NGUYEN THU HUONG MAYA LE VU LONG NGUYEN NHU QUYNH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY CHANANUN CHOTRUNGROJ PRODUCTION DESIGNER DO TRONG AN COSTUME DESIGNER TRAN PHUONG THAO MAKE UP KIEU THU & LAN ANH EDITOR JULIE BEZIAU COMPOSER TON THAT AN SOUND MIX ROMAN DYMNY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DANG THI HOANG YEN DANG THANH TAM PRODUCED BY TRAN THI BICH NGOC & ASH MAYFAIR WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ASH MAYFAIR

Mayfair Pictures

ANNAM

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# THE THIRD WIFE

A FILM BY **ASH MAYFAIR**

**Vietnam - 2015 - 2018 - 1:66 - 5.1 - 94mins - Vietnamese**

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*Mayfair Pictures*

**ANNAM**

prod3colors

HONG KONG - ASIA FILM FINANCING FORUM  
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香港亞洲電影投資會





## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

In the late 19th century in rural Vietnam, fourteen-year-old May is given away in an arranged marriage and becomes the third wife to her older husband. May learns that she can gain status and security if she gives birth to a male child. This becomes a real possibility when she gets pregnant. However, her path is fraught with danger when May starts to develop an attraction for Xuan, the second wife. As May observes the unfolding tragedy of forbidden love and its devastating consequences, she must make a choice, to either carry on in silence and safety, or forge a way towards personal freedom.

## **SYNOPSIS**

In the late 19th century in rural Vietnam, Fourteen-year-old May is given away in an arranged marriage as payment for her father's debt. On her wedding day she becomes the third wife to her older husband, Hung.

After the wedding night, May learns that she can only gain status by asserting herself, not just as a sexual being, but also as a woman who can and will give birth to a male child. May also learns how she can find her position between the other two wives and how to navigate the expectation placed on them by the family.

May's hope to change her station turns into a real and tantalizing possibility when she gets pregnant. However, the path towards security becomes fraught with danger when May starts to develop an attraction for Xuan, the second wife. May discovers that Xuan is having an affair with her husband's firstborn son. This equally excites and frightens her. Xuan's beauty and freedom, especially in nature, draws May like a moth to the flame.

May spies on the second wife and her lover, fascinated by the intrigue of secret passion. Prompted by what she witnesses, May learns to embrace pleasure both physically and emotionally. The affair comes to a breaking point when May's husband decides to find his son a young wife, also via an arranged marriage. May cannot contain her feelings anymore and confesses how she feels to Xuan, whose rejection devastates her.

On the day of the son's wedding, we see that the new bride is younger than May and is even more terrified. When she is rejected by her new husband, she begs to be allowed to return home. But denied by her own father who refuses to take her back, the young girl takes her own life.

May finally comes to an understanding of the brutal truth. The options available to her are few and far between. The arrival of her child, a baby girl, makes this struggle imminent. As May observes the unfolding tragedy of forbidden love and its devastating consequences, she must make a choice, to either carry on in silence and safety, or forge a way towards personal freedom.



## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

The *Third Wife* is inspired by the history of my family. It is a coming-of-age story, a tale of love and self-discovery in a time when women were rarely given a voice.

The themes of women's sexuality, the growth from childhood to adulthood and the individual's struggle within a conservative patriarchal society have always fascinated me. I grew up in Vietnam, a society that held traditions, history, and community to be more valuable than personal independence. The heroine of this story embarks on a journey where her identity must assume many roles, that of a child, a woman, a wife, a lover, and eventually a mother.

The men and women in my script are all drawn from real people, connected to the rural landscape of the country. The story, although fictitious, is a tapestry woven from many true events. Both my great-grandmother and my grand-mother had arranged marriages at a young age. My great-grandmother lived in a polygamous marriage from when she was a teenager until the end of her life. The history of arranged marriages is deep-rooted and I was drawn to the subject not only because of my familial heritage but also because this is unfortunately a practice that still exists in several countries in the world.

The themes of sexuality and sensuality in the film therefore had to be handled delicately. Nevertheless, I did not want to shy away from portraying what would be emotionally truthful. May's desire for Xuan, coupled with her pregnancy and the shock of living in such a circumstance at a very young age would naturally force her to grow beyond her years. May's wedding night and the rituals involved stemmed from ancient Vietnamese traditions brought to my attention by the actors themselves during the rehearsal period. I was fortunate to have had a very sensitive and mature actress in the leading role who understood the demanding nature of the part, whose family was also extremely supportive. May's journey in the film became much richer because my actress was able to give the character her own emotional resonance, bringing her personal understanding and sympathy to the story. Within the socio-political background of the period, I felt that it was important to address the subject matter of love and desire with as much candor as possible. It is not my intention to portray these women as victims. Rather, May is a soul capable of so much more than the roles prescribed to her by society, not unlike the fates of many women in our present time.

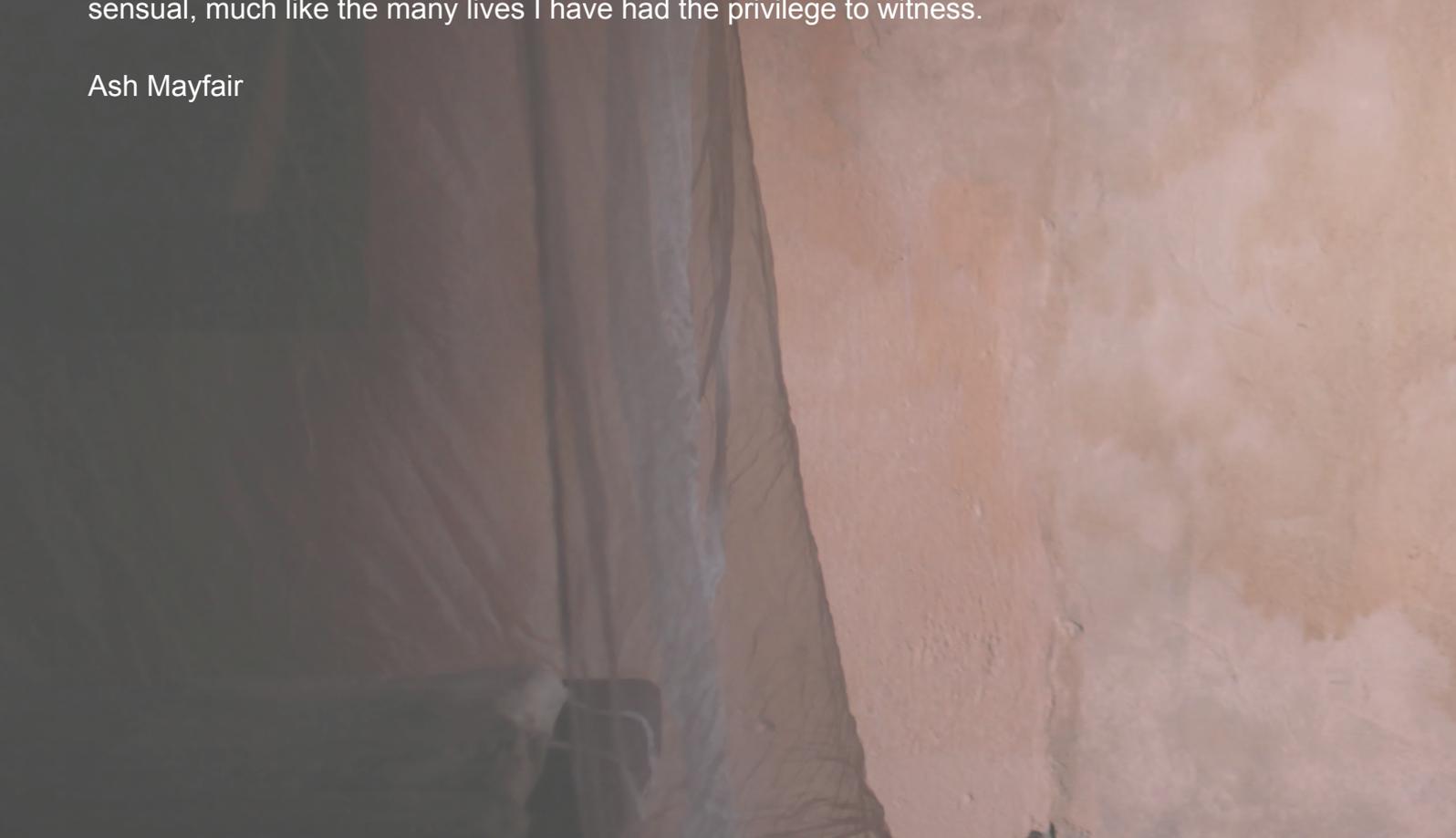
As a child, tales of incredible circumstances involving birth and death, child rearing, living as a concubine and the ensuing consequences, lost love and found comfort, were the wellsprings that nourished my imagination. When we embarked on the journey to make this film five years ago, I found that many people I talked to during my research and preparation have lived through similar experiences or have had family members with nearly identical fates to my characters. During the making of the film, it was important that the cast and crew understood the way life was in a very intimate way. I held long improvisational rehearsal periods when the cast would live and interact in costumes and in characters. The set was designed in a way that was historically exact and each of the separate spaces in the manor would provide a completely immersive experience for the actors. I lived on set for several weeks during the rewrite of the script in order to properly

absorb the feeling of the landscape. During rehearsals, I worked with the cast very closely on every aspect of their characters, using historical research, literature, painting and music to inform ourselves of the thought process of people in the period. I was lucky to have grown up in a land enriched by a prominent history of folklore. The oral tradition of Vietnamese art and literature has given me a deep appreciation for the musicality of the language whose poetic sensibility I hope to bring forward in the film.

In terms of aesthetics, the visual choices of *The Third Wife* are largely informed by the landscape and cultural traditions of northern Vietnam, the birth place of my great-grandparents. Nature is a dominant symbolic force closely tied to spirituality and religion. People's lives and habits were informed by the movement of the sun and the seasons. It was therefore important to portray this using as much natural light as possible. Our Director of Photography went through a lot of experiments using live fire for lighting during night time scenes because I did not want any artificial feeling to permeate the frame. Consequently, *The Third Wife* has a painterly approach to cinematography. The stillness of most of the composition comes from the desire to make every frame as close as possible to a watercolor painting.

As an artist, I believe that *The Third Wife* is a story that needs to be told not just because it is deeply personal to me but also because the themes explored and the lives unfolded carry universal significance. Being separated from a loved one is devastating for men and women of any decade. The struggle between an individual's desires and the duty owed to one's family affects people of every class, race and gender. Girls and women everywhere still suffer from a lack of education and professional opportunities, even in modern, developed societies. I became a filmmaker because no other medium has given me as efficient a way to reach out and connect with others. The beauty of the screen for me is not only escapist but also transformative. This film will have moments that are blunt, uncomfortable, harrowing and painful. However, I hope that it will also be forgiving, generous, humorous, loving and sensual, much like the many lives I have had the privilege to witness.

Ash Mayfair



## SHOOTING THE THIRD WIFE

Due to the nature of the story, we decided to assemble a crew with the majority of the creative leads being female. A woman in the role of a cinematographer was an anomaly in Vietnam. The local crew was very inspired by the artistic standard of our Director of Photography, who incidentally worked through the arduous production period in the early stages of her pregnancy, with a level of commitment and professionalism that awed our entire team. Women's stories are worth telling and female artists have the immense capacity to realize potentials beyond what was previously defined for their sex. I believe that we were able to successfully embody this in the production of the film.

The Third Wife was a very challenging production because of our desire to stay as authentic as possible to historical detail. It was important to film using real locations untouched by modern developments, which meant that we often had to hike into remote mountainous regions for each exterior scene. So much of what was discovered in these natural environments, such as the growth and harvest of silk worms, the different birdsongs, the fog and mist caused by changing weather, became prominent visual themes in the film. The search for an actress who could play the titular role also took nearly 8 months during which time we travelled all over the country and auditioned more than 900 girls in middle and high schools for the part.

My wish is that The Third Wife will be the first of many stories about humanity and its complex beauty that I will get to tell and that the movie will take on a life of its own to touch and inspire other artists to do the same, including young girls who may want to share their own stories in the future.



## CREW

### ASH MAYFAIR - WRITER, DIRECTOR

Ash Mayfair was born & grown up in Vietnam, she received an MFA in filmmaking from NYU. Ash's short films, *The Silver Man*, *Sam*, *Heart of a Doll*, *Grasshoppers*, *Lupo*, *Walking the Dead*, and *No Exit* have been shown by numerous international film festivals. *The Third Wife* is her first feature film. The screenplay won the Spike Lee Production Fund 2014 and was on the NYU Purple List 2015 for the best screenplays written by graduates. *The Third Wife* also won the Grand Prix at Autumn Meeting Lab 2015 in Vietnam and the Best Award for a non-Hong Kong project at the Hong Kong Asia Film Financing Forum 2016. In 2017, the project is also among the 10 films selected to be presented at IFP (Independent Filmmakers Project), New York 2017.



### NGOC TRAN THI BICH - PRODUCER

Graduated from Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema in 1998. Since then, she has produced and gained tremendous experience in Vietnam's film industry. Some of her highlights are "Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories" (2014), directed by Phan Dang Di, selected for official competition at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival, while "Glorious Ashes," by Bui Thac Chuyen, was presented at the 2017 Busan International Film Festival's Asian Project Market & won the Busan award, is also selected at Cinefondation L'Atelier, Cannes 2018. Ngoc's ambition is to support Vietnamese filmmakers and help bring Vietnamese cinema to the world.

### CHANANUN CHOTRUNGROJ - DP

Chananun Chotrungroj shot "Karaoke Girl," which premiered at the 2012 Rotterdam Film Festival. She was an Artist-in-Residence at the Korean National Contemporary Art Museum in Seoul and her photography and installations have been exhibited in Bangkok, Seoul, and Beijing. She received an MFA in Film from NYU, where she was awarded the Ang Lee Fellowship and Department Fellowship and received the Nestor Almendros Award for Outstanding Cinematography by a woman 2013. Her recent work "Motel Mist" premiered at Rotterdam in 2016. Another feature she shot, "Pop Aye," premiered and won at Sundance and Rotterdam in 2016.

## **JULIE BEZIAU - EDITOR**

Julie Beziau is based in Toulouse, France. She has edited many award-winning documentary and narrative features including “Big father, small father & other stories...” (2015), selected in the official competition at the International Berlin Film Festival 2015, “Bi, Don’t Be Afraid” (2010), winner of the ACID & SACD award at the Cannes Film Festival 2010 and nominated for Critics Week Grand Prize 2010, as well as Adrift (2009), winner of the FIPRESCI Prize at Venice Film Festival 2009. Julie was nominated for Best Film Editing award at the ASEAN IFFA for Homostratus (2013).

## **CAST**

Trần Nữ Yên Khê	Hà
Mai Thu Hường (Maya)	Xuân
Nguyễn Phương Trà My	Mây
Nguyễn Như Quỳnh	Lao
Lê Vũ Long	Hùng
Nguyễn Thành Tâm	Son
Lâm Thanh Mỹ	Liên
Mai Cát Vi	Nhàn
Nguyễn Hồng Chương	Cụ Bá
Bùi Trung Anh	Tuyết’s father

## **CREW**

Written and Directed by	Ash Mayfair
Producers	Trần Thị Bích Ngọc Ash Mayfair
Executive Producers	Đặng Thị Hoàng Yến Đặng Thành Tâm
Director of Photography	Chananun Chotrungroj
Production Designer	Đỗ Trọng An
Costume Designer	Trần Phương Thảo
Make-up Artist	Nguyễn Kiều Thu
Editor	Julie Béziau
Colorist	Yov Moor
Composer	Tôn Thất An
Sound Mixer	Roman Dymny
Sound Designer	Edouard Morin
Casting Director	Nguyễn Thy
Artistic Advisor	Trần Anh Hùng



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