Elaine Velazques and the Mien

Filmmaker documents a dying culture

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Elaine Velazquez came to Portland from the Bronx, via Puerto Rico. The Northwest was this country's adventurous fringe, and Portland was greener than anything, a regular hippie heaven. It was the early 1970s. Velazquez never went back.

The Yiu Mien family of Ay Choy Saelee came to Portland from the mountains of Laos, via another century. They came from a world with no cars, no Burger Kings, a world where

·Profile

the children worship their ancestors and spirits live in the rocks.

Elaine Velazquez doesn't speak Mien. Ay Choy and his relatives don't speak English. For eight years, they have been talking to each other. Velazquez brought her curiosity, her cameras and microphones and interpreters and lights. Ay Choy and his family brought their trust and desire to keep the old life alive. The result is an hour-long documentary titled Moving Mountains, which won a blue ribbon in the San Francisco American Film and Video Festival, and opened at Cinema 21 last month.

After eight years of asking the questions, Velazquez fidgets a bit on the other side of the tape recorder. She talks fast—a New Yorker still, after all these years—and worries that she's talking too fast, saying too much or not enough of the right things. What's clear, from the film and from her thoughtful discussion, is that something crossed the gulf, bridged the gaps of language and culture between herself and the Mien. Empathy. An urge to document, to save what would otherwise be lost.

Something Elaine Velazquez and Ay Choy Saelee both could understand.

"In 1981 and 1982, I was a freelance producer for *Front Street Weekly* on Oregon Public Broadcasting. I interviewed some Hmong and some Yiu Mien people in Portland and did a ten-minute piece (on the Mien family). It was a subject that needed a lot more depth than that.

"I found the people very appealing. I was interested in the fact that these people are here and nobody knows who they are. They're a very little-known tribe from the mountains of Laos.

"These people are from a different century. The only people who could read and write were the shamans. They had no roads, no cars, no electricity. The war introduced them to the 20th century. The Mien were just drafted; it wasn't like they had a choice. The Laos government was very prejudiced against the Mien, kind of like the way we are against people in the Appalachians.

"In the film, I deal basically with these seven characters. It's the family of Ay Choy Saelee, his wife Farm Yoon, his father Fou Choy, who's a shaman, and his mom Lai Poo. Fou Choy and Lai Poo talk about the ancient culture. They are the spokespeople for the past.

"I also focused on this other family, on a bride who was getting married. One of the first things I shot was this big Mien wedding, three days, three nights. It was the first one that ever took place in America. I follow Fey Finh, the bride, and Low Choy, the man she married. Her brother is also in the piece.

"They were very open and trusting. The people who are a little more western, like Ay Choy and Farm Yoon, were harder to get to know, in a way, because they had more of our values. They were a little more self-protective.

"When I filmed the wedding, the place was so crowded. Absolutely packed. I was totally surrounded by these people. And they were wonderful. They really appreciated it. I think they understood the importance of their culture being documented. Their culture is dying; there's no way for it to survive in this country.

"My last film, called *Some of These Days*, was portraits of four older women. It was about their lives and what it's like to age in our society. This (Mien film) was much more overwhelming. I re-translated every interview twice. I was very careful about that. I was afraid about how deep I could go without speaking the language.

"The older woman, Lai Poo, is more positive about American culture than Foo Choy, the shaman. Women have something to gain in this culture. [Mien] is a very sexist society. The film deals with that a lot. A woman can't eat at the same table with the family; she has to eat separately. She has to wait while the men eat. It's just incredible. You try not to put your own values on that, but it's not easy.

"Now I kind of tease them. Like the last time I went to Fey Finh's house, I said, 'Are you going to sit down with me?' And she said, 'No, I'm not.' And her brother will say, 'Well, in my house we all sit together.' So things are changing.

"Mien worship their ancestors and they believe that you have to take care of your ancestors here on earth; you have to feed them and give them money. And if you have good children who worship you, you do well in the third world.

"So they believe when someone becomes Christian, the ancestors are just going to be lost. All these generations and generations of Mien are just going to be gone.

"I tried to be as even-handed as I could. Even with Christianity. In the film, I tried to understand why these people would become Christian and just present it straight. I feel like I've done a careful job.

"Fey Finh, the one who got married, is very Mien. She's not like Farm Yoon, who loves rock-and-roll and is becoming really Western. I try to understand (Fey Finh), but I'm not sure I really can, because she's really deeply Mien. She doesn't mind that she can't eat at the same table; she accepts these things. She's a good Mien woman; these are her values.

"They love the film; they really appreciate the film. They want it for their children. Their children are losing the whole sense of who they are. This film captures a lot of the transitions when they came here, the things that were going on that are rapidly no longer taking place.

"I've thought about doing a dramatic piece about gay women. But I haven't done a dramatic piece before. I thought I'd just start out with scriptwriting and see how that goes. I don't know. It's taken so much to get this done. And I do want to see it distributed well. So at least for a while, that's what I'm going to be doing.

"I'm a visual artist. I was painting and drawing for years and years. Later I was working for a place that did videos. I discovered I had this real ability with cutting (film) that became obvious with the first piece I did. I like to put things out into the world. A painting is not going to get into the world in the same way.

"I think what affects the way I see things (as a filmmaker) is my really caring deeply. I'm a Scorpio; I like a lot of intensity and a lot of depth, and that's what I look for in people. I like to know what really goes on for people. I think that's what draws me.

"I like the fact that film does have such power. And I believe that on some level it can change things. It's not an activist thing where you see a film and go out in the street and change the world. But my film *Some of These Days* moved people deeply and made them think about what it was like for them to age, or for people close to them.

"While I was doing this film, I wasn't really sure I could do it well because it was such a large undertaking. But I feel like it does succeed. You can get inside these people and understand what their lives are like and think about things through their values and their world. I'm very happy that's the way it came out." ▼

WILLOW-WITT RANCH
Country Guest House

Enjoy X-C skiing and hiking on 440 acres of meadows and forest. Private suite in old country farmhouse, quiet and restful, hot tub. Visit Ashland theatres, restaurants, galleries. Brochure available.

A WILDERNESS BED & BREAKFAST
658 Shale City Road
Ashland, OR 97520
503-776-1728

LOOKING FOR FUN STUFF?
LOOKING FOR A GREAT GIFT?

French Bread Bags $11.95

Cards
Sunglasses
T-shirts
Retro Goodies
and More

Now open in downtown Portland

YO ! VINNIE
721 SW 10TH • 228-4800

Oregon Country Fair

A unique environment featuring a wide variety of entertainment, astounding international vaudeville, quality crafts, delicious food and an exceptional spirit of community

JULY 13, 14 & 15
11 am - 7 pm

$6 Friday, $8 Saturday, $7 Sunday
12 + under free, alter-abled & 55 or better 1/2 price
Near Veneta, 13 miles west of Eugene.
No dogs, public camping, video cameras

TAKE THE BUS!
From the Lane County Fairgrounds, 796 West 13th, Eugene

SANDRA K. PINCHES, Ph.D.
Counseling and Psychotherapy
1809 N.W. Johnson, Ste. 7
Portland, OR 97209
(503) 227-7558

Specializing in issues of:
- Recovering Alcoholics
- Co-dependency
- Lesbian & gay couples
- Intimacy & commitment

Advertising in just out works . . .
"We get a better rate of reponse from just out than any other paper in Portland, and we've tried them all."

Guy Swanson
Photographic Image Gallery