'A Dream in Hanoi'

Documentary. Directed and written by Todd Weidlinger. *(In English and Vietnamese with English subtitles. Not rated. 91 minutes. At Bay Area theaters.)*

On paper, it seemed like an ideal arrangement: Take a theater company from Portland, Ore., send it to Hanoi in the fall of 2000 and have it collaborate with a renowned Vietnamese theater company on one of Shakespeare's most illuminating plays, "A Midsummmer Night's Dream."

The result, as captured by documentarian Todd Weidlinger, was anything but smooth. In "A Dream in Hanoi," egos clash, cultural misunderstandings are common, and last-minute obstacles from the Vietnamese government threaten to derail a performance that had started out with such high hope.

American Shakespeare scholar Lorelle Browning, who spent five years arranging the co-production, is reduced to tears by the artistic confrontations that emerge in Hanoi, but there are epiphanies, too. Walking and motorbiking around Vietnam's capital reveals a culture that is rich in sounds, sights and smells. A Vietnamese actress goes against her country's tradition and loves displaying more affection on stage.

Weidlinger was in the right place at the right time. Who could have predicted that then-President Clinton would send a representative to rehearsals to gauge whether he should attend opening night? The visit adds a new layer of tension to the production – a tension that never lets up until the end of "A Dream in Hanoi." Narrated by F. Murray Abraham, this documentary is a treat to behold.

– Jonathan Curiel

In the spotlight

Bay Area filmmaker documents cross-cultural dream in 'Hanoi'

THIS IS the true story of two theater groups selected to work in a playhouse to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting ... real.

No, it's not another reality show. It's Bay Area filmmaker Tom Weidlinger's "A Dream in Hanoi," opening Friday at the Shattuck in Berkeley and the Opera Plaza in San Francisco. (It also is the opening night film for the 18th annual Film Arts Festival, kicking off on Wednesday.)

The documentary is a hilarious and illuminating behind-the-scenes look at a cross-cultural collaboration of two theater companies, one American and the other Vietnamese.

Through the Vietnam America Theater Exchange, or VATE program, the Central Dramatic Company of Vietnam works with cast members of the Artists Repertory Theater of Portland, Ore., to produce Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in Hanoi's famed Opera House.

Weidlinger's film captures the directors, actors and technicians as their ambitious and well-intentioned project encounters teary-eyed artistic spats and alarming surprises.

The Berkeley resident has been making documentaries for the last 25 years, ranging in topics from violence-prevention activism to the mythology behind Manifest Destiny. His previous documentary, "Boys Will Be Men," aired in PBS last Father's Day and focused on the issues boys face while growing up in American society.

It's a bit of an unusual concept. How did you get involved with the project?

"Mike (Sherman), the executive producer, had gone to school with Lorelle. (Lorelle Browning was the play's co-producer and founder of VATE.) Mike called me and said, 'Are you interested in doing this film?' and a month later I was on a plane to Hanoi. I jumped on it in a heartbeat. I thought the whole idea of these two theater companies trying to come together was kind of kooky. I wasn't sure the whole thing was going to succeed. It actually turned out to be quite successful."

What was the filming experience like?

"I had to get permission from the cultural ministry, so I wasn't sure I was going to be able to make the film until two days before I got on the plane. I have a lot of experience of working with different countries around the world, so I'm sort of used to that. But I had no idea how things were going to unfold. Once I started working on the film, I was shooting almost continuously. The trick there is to understand what you're getting when you're getting it, and what's significant. Every so many days I would stop shooting and look at the tape. I'd figure out who I wanted to interview next, what questions to ask, what stories. I shot 120 hours of material in Vietnam. Many of the stories, what you're seeing is kind of the tip of the iceberg, the best of the iceberg."

In working with the Vietnamese crew on the film, did you encounter similar artistic challenges?

"Not really, because the film was very much my own thing. It wasn't an artistic collaboration with the Vietnamese. I had a remarkably easy time compared to what the actors went through. In some ways, the biggest challenge was getting people to open up to me on the camera. In Vietnam, it's not really good manners to criticize your guest. When I first started interviewing the Vietnamese actors and directors, everything was hunky-dory."

Presumably, both sides, especially the Americans who fostered the partnership, would know they were walking into an especially challenging collaboration, given the language and cultural differences. Why, then, the extremely heated squabbling that seemed to border on the disrespectful?

"I think it's interesting. There was an editor for a Vietnamese online publication who asked what you just asked: 'Could they have been more sensitive?' It's very easy in the abstract to conceive of oneself as open to other cultures and sensitive. It's differ-

DOUG DURAN/TIMES

"A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM" co-director Allen Nause rides his bike in "A Dream in Hanoi," top, a documentary by filmmaker Tom Weidlinger, above.

ent when you get into situations, when you get into conflict. The reality: Nobody can prepare you for that. The Americans felt like the ground was swept away from under their feet. They didn't know what was going on. Part of that is language, and part is culture. Those kinds of conflicts are almost inevitable in these sort of cross-cultural collaborations. In fact, this film is being used in Vietnam by NGOs (non-governmental organizations associated with the United Nations) and American companies, which they show to their staff as a way to talk about the cultural issues that come up. People see in the film the kind of issues that come up in these cross-cultural collaborations."

Was this one of the hopes you had for doing the film?

"Absolutely. And I think the stated intent of them going into it was to see if this might be a model for cross-cultural collaboration. To me, that's what the film is about ... People hung in there and worked. The foreigners, the Americans, usually have so much money. In this case, they didn't have that power or that clout. They were really obliged to negotiate and compromise with the Vietnamese."

Some of your previous films have been about people from different backgrounds working together. This seems a given for conflict in the films.

"I don't think I would say I'm just attracted to conflict. Most good stories have some conflict in them. But there are many different kinds of conflict. The kind of conflict I'm involved in is where people are trying to reach out to each other across some social or cultural or economic barrier. It's really relationships, and what people have to do to arrive at relationships."

How did you get into documentary filmmaking?

"I lived in Los Angeles for 13 years, and had an agent and would pitch ideas (for feature films) to studios. At the same time, I was making documentaries on the side. I was getting jobs in public television and I got to the point where I was getting more satisfaction from working in documentaries. I had more control of what I was doing. To make it in the feature-film world ... I didn't want to pay those particular sets of dues. The other thing that drew me to documentary work is every time you make a documentary, you become a student again. It's sort of like your professional career is paying you for a lifelong education."

Sort of like a journalist.

"In some ways it is, in some ways it isn't. If you're a newsperson, your responsibility is to be as objective as you can in reporting the facts. Many times people have a misconception about documentary filmmaking —you set up the camera and reality tells its story. I don't think it could be further from the truth. It's the filmmaker's point of view. I don't pretend that they (the documentaries) are objective. They have a message, and you can influence that in the editing room. To me, that's what makes the best documentary films. When you watch a documentary film, there's a story there. You can go into a war zone and start shooting and the footage would be great, but you could have no story. What I learned in dramatic filmmaking school is extremely valuable. The art of dramatic filmmaking is telling a story, some kind of transformation that happens to people."

— Cassandra Braun

"A Dream in Hanoi" opens Friday at Shattuck Cinemas, 2230 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, and Opera Plaza Cinemas, 601 Van Ness Ave., S.F. It also shows at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Brava Theater Center, 2781 24th St., S.F. $10. Call 415-552-FILM. For more information on the film, check out www.adreaminhanoi.com. Cassandra Braun is a Times feature writer. She can be reached at 925-977-8483 or cbraun@cctimes.com.

Acting out a Vietnam War over Shakespeare

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2002

San Francisco Chronicle NB E3

2 theater groups clashed prior to creative truce

By Vicky Elliott
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

THE ARTS

The idea was to bring two theater troupes together, one from the United States, one from Vietnam, and in a generous spirit of reconciliation, to have them work their magic on a joint production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." But pretty soon, like the mix-and-match lovers in Shakespeare's play, the two groups, separated by language, were running into a thicket of crossed wires and hurt feelings.

Tom Weidlinger's film "A Dream in Hanoi," which is playing in the Mill Valley Film Festival this weekend and will be in selected theaters in November, is a record of this star-crossed endeavor, mounted in the Vietnamese capital two years ago. Its subtitle is "A True Tale of Love, Stage Fright and Noodle Soup," but "Lost in Translation" would work equally well. The piece is a hilarious study in miscommunication.

"Even with the best intentions, people who go into cross-cultural relationships haven't a clue," says the Berkeley filmmaker, who followed the rehearsals at Vietnam's national theater for 10 weeks as they began to unravel on many fronts over acting methods, stage decorum, timetables.

"It's extremely difficult — we pick up different cues, we read each other differently. Just when you think you've got it, something else comes up. The layers of the onion keep on peeling off: Every time you think 'I've arrived,' there's another layer."

Weidlinger, a tall and patient man who seems not to have a mean bone in his body, seeks out moments of conflict, the times when people just aren't getting along, when things are getting under their skin. He turns his camera steadily on raw emotions that can make you want to turn your gaze away, but leaves you with new understanding.

In 1995 for a segment of his PBS "Making Peace" series, he captured the uneasy feelings stirred up in a multiethnic Berkeley workshop on unlearning racism. Three years ago, he documented the making of a Yerba Buena theater production in San Francisco, in which female victims of violence put on a play with men convicted of abuse and assault.

This First World-Third World meeting was a little different. The Westerners didn't have the usual trump card, money. The Vietnamese were at the top of their profession, while their guests, members of a well-respected but small company from Oregon, had signed up to work virtually for free and had little room for maneuvering.

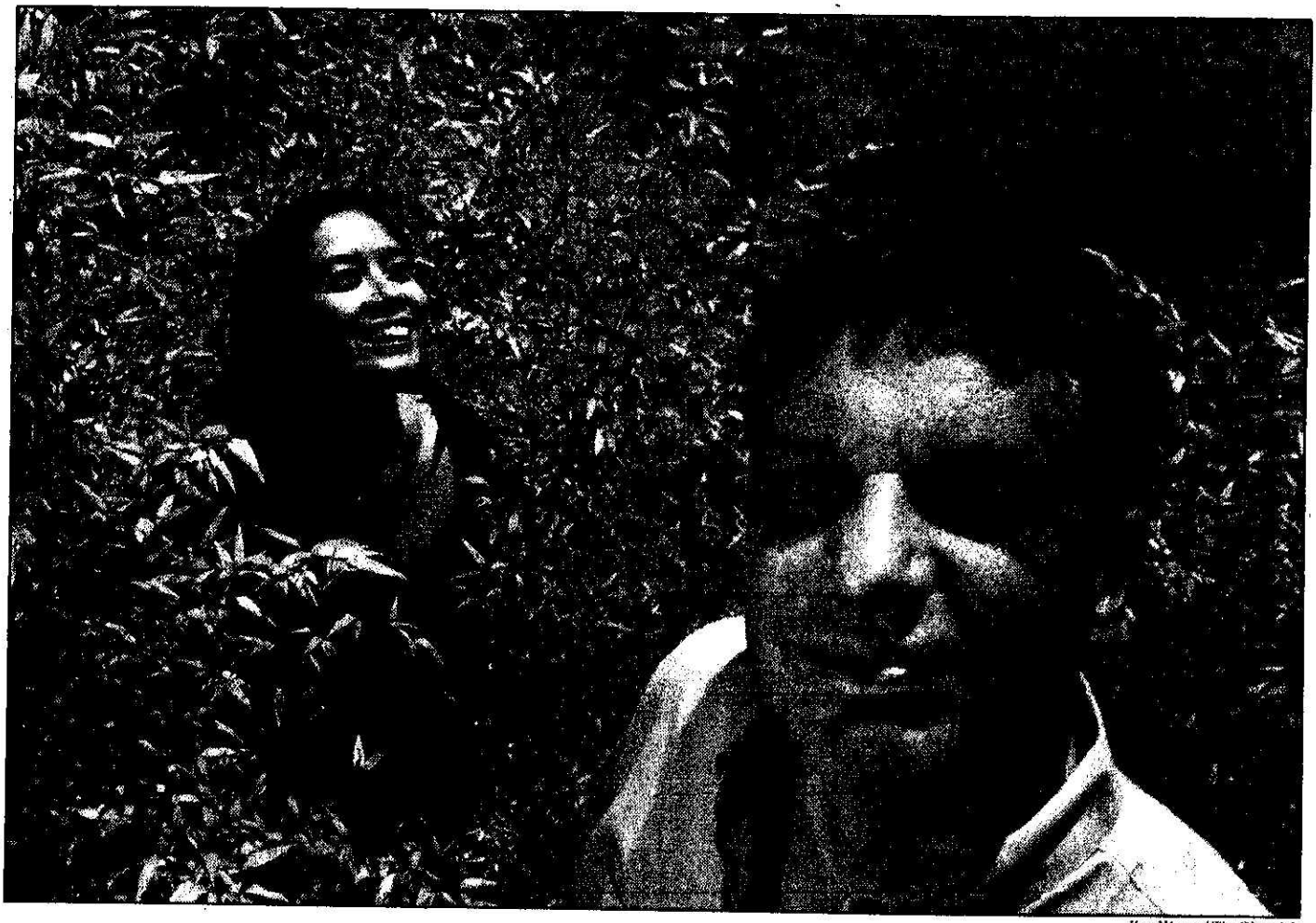
The play had two directors, one from each country; two artistic directors (ditto) and mixed doubles of stars. To top it all, the dialogue cut between English and Vietnamese, and the actors had to memorize chunks of poetry in each other's language.

Nguyen Thi, who played the fairy queen Titania under the stage name Chieu Xuan, recalled the experience when she came over to Berkeley this summer to improve her English. From the outset, the scripts were an issue, she said. Vietnamese actors come to the first rehearsal with their lines memorized and preconceived ideas about their parts, while Allen Nause, director of Portland's Artists Repertory Theater, likes to start his cast with text in hand and have them work their way into a feeling for their character.

Xuan was open to this new way of working, she said, but many of her colleagues weren't. Vietnamese lead actors each have a

On screen

"Dream in Hanoi" will be screened during the Mill Valley Film Festival at 11:30 a.m. Saturday at the Rafael Film Center, 1118 Fourth St. in San Rafael, and at 6:45 p.m. Monday at the Sequoia Theater, 25 Throckmorton Ave., in Mill Valley. $9 general and $7 for California Film Institute members. (925) 866-9559 or visit *www.mvff.com.*



KAT WADE / *The Chronicle*

Tom Weidlinger (right) shot a film in Hanoi with Vietnamese actress Nguyen Thi (stage name Chieu Xuan), shown here at his Berkeley home.

prompter in rehearsals, standing nearby, who eagerly gives them their lines if they slip up. Nause found this shorted out dramatic inspiration.

The fairy king, another of Xuan's colleagues, had decided he would play Oberon as gay. "With this enigmatic laugh," Nause recalls. "I asked him, 'Why is he gay?' And he said, 'They have no children.' "

Some of Shakespeare's lines just didn't wash. When Bottom, the country bumpkin wakes up from his dream, he announces bombastically: 'The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen ... .' It proved impossible to deliver the speech as the playwright wrote it because the Vietnamese were all whispering, "He's making a mistake!"

In the film, Weidlinger slowly builds up a sense of the increasing discomfort onstage. Helena, played by a coltish young actress from Portland, likes to stamp her foot and fling her arms around, where your typical Vietnamese actress "draws herself in like a snail" and goes in for modest sighs and pining.

Her opposite number, Do Ky, soon starts to look thoroughly turned off. "When Kristen hugs me too tight, I feel rather uncomfortable," he says. "In Vietnam, shyness is a tradition. It turns up even on the stage."

The celebrated Vietnamese director, Doan Hoang Giang, is thinking musical extravaganza and wants to give Puck five attendants, each thumping a drum. Lorelle Browning, the purist Shakespeare scholar who has been laboring for years to make this historic collaboration a reality, has a conniption and threatens to call the whole thing off.

Then the players suddenly had themselves barred from the elegant Hanoi Opera House and move into the Soviet-Vietnamese Cultural Friendship Palace, a decaying 1960s monstrosity with a rickety lighting board that leaves the stage manager thinking she's touched down on the Starship Enterprise. The Vietnamese tire of their collaborators' need to plan – "I feel the Americans want a script even for a soccer match," someone complains. And just about the only thing that anyone can agree on is that they all hate the costumes.

But the course of true love never did run smooth and things come out right in the end. "Before, I used to think that Americans were very fierce, with very strong personalities," Xuan says in the film as the Oregon theater company tearfully gets ready to fly home. "I was completely surprised to find that you are very gentle."

When the Vietnamese and the Americans who took part in the production saw the film for the first time with translations, Weidlinger said, and realized what had really been going on, the scales fell from their eyes.

Ho Quoc Hung, who acted as a liaison between the two companies, came over to work with the Oregon company for a while this summer and stopped by to see Weidlinger in Berkeley. "He told me that immediately after the production, the Vietnamese had wanted to forget all about it – the experience had been so difficult for them," says Weidlinger, who took his film over to Hanoi this March and got a rave reception.

But when they saw the film, the hard shell of bad feeling melted away. "Now, they only have warm, wonderful memories," says Weidlinger. "They've forgotten all about the difficult parts."

E-mail Vicky Elliott at velliott@sfchronicle.com.

A DREAM IN HANOI

(DOCU)

A Moira Production (Berkeley, Calif.) production, in association with Dateline Prods. Produced by Tom Weidlinger. Executive producers, Michael Sherman, Rose Shrinian

Directed, written by Tom Weidlinger. Camera (color, DV-to-35mm), Weidlinger; editor, Maureen Gosling; music, Pho Duc Phuong; sound (Dolby), Weidlinger, Wesley McLean. **Reviewed on videocassette at Seattle Film Festival,** June 14, 2002. Running time: **91 MIN.**

With: Lorelle Browning, Doan Hoang Giang, Allen Nause, Do Ky, Anh Dung, Doug Miller, Ngan Hoa, Kristen Martha Brown, Quang Thai, Tran Thach, F. Murray Abraham, narrator.

(Vietnamese and English dialogue.)

By KEN EISNER

All the world's a stage, and the complex relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam is taken to the floorboards in "A Dream in Hanoi," a tremendously moving record of the first collaboration between theater companies from both countries. Heading for Mill Valley and Hawaii fests, lovingly crafted pic is likely to go the indie route, but could do some biz for a culturally astute outfit before ending up with pubcasters internationally.

Sparks of many colors fly when the Central Dramatic Company of Hanoi and Portland, Ore.'s Artists Repertory Theater join forces in Vietnam to stage a polyglot version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," complete with ballet dancers and onstage musicians. The former enemies are well received, and extended footage of their travels in and around Hanoi gives a strong flavor of the region.

Still, culture shock sets in, especially when it comes to the duplication of key positions, with Allen Nause directing the Americans and Doan Hoang Giang handling his countrymen. The thesps get on well, but the Viets are used to easier workdays and are shocked by the physical boldness and easy intimacy of the Yanks, with severe umbrage taken at one Kristen Brown, whose aggressively goofy Helena appears vulgar and overly masculine in their eyes. One young actor explains that Vietnamese are "shy by tradition, even onstage."

Once the ice is broken, though, some pretty serious kissing happens in rehearsal, to everyone's abashed amusement. Elsewhere, things aren't so lovey-dovey. Creative differences abound, especially between Doan and producer Lorelle Browning, each of whom is attempting to stay true to diverse visions — one based on Asian heritage, the other holding Shakespeare sacrosanct. The Statesiders, lefties by nature, are revolted by interference by Communist officials, who won't allow the troupes to sell tickets until censors, who refuse to come until opening night, have seen the show.

Other hints of political-historical context come when older locals recall youth spent dodging American B-52s, and when then-President Clinton and Hillary arrive in town and are rumored to be attending the first show in Hanoi's spectacularly beautiful opera house. When that doesn't happen, unfortunate events are set in motion, making more drama happen offstage than on.

Helmer Tom Weidlinger, a PBS vet who has previously documented the velvet conflict between Czechs and Slovaks, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the roots of World War I, has an unobtrusive, everywhere-at-once style, with events neatly tied together by F. Murray Abraham's low-key narration.

The play-without-a-play setting is given plenty of context, with many nice touches, such as the proliferation of Coca-Cola ads or a middle-aged Viet man who plays stunning Delta blues on his guitar. Pho Duc Phuong's compositions for the stage serve double duty by accompanying the colorful travelogue segs of this very smoothly assembled pic.

Ending, which finds the Oregonians going home after three months and successful performances in Hanoi and Saigon, is highly emotional, with even the most argumentative opponents hugging like long-lost family members. "We've earned the right," says one American, tears in her eyes, "to call each other friends."

Dreaming in Vietnam

Oregon and Vietnamese theater artists intersect on a "Midsummer Night's Dream" production

By BOB HICKS
THE OREGONIAN

MOIRA PRODUCTIONS

Tuan Hai (center) as Puck is surrounded by the assistant spirits who became a bone of contention in the Vietnamese "Dream."

Bill and Hillary Clinton didn't show up.

A half-dozen unexpected fairies did.

A stage kiss threw a Vietnamese actress for a loop.

An American producer wept tears of frustration.

A Vietnamese director insisted on hacking away line after line of Shakespeare's words.

And somehow, through months of squabbling, misunderstanding and hard-earned trust, an unlikely team of Vietnamese and American theater artists created a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that captivated audiences from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.

"A Dream in Hanoi: A True Story of Love, Stage Fright and Noodle Soup" is a rare and fascinating inside look at the making of a small bicultural miracle — a collaboration in 2000 between the renowned Central Dramatic Company of Vietnam and Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre on a production of Shakespeare's great comic fantasy.

Writer/director Tom Weidlinger's documentary, which is narrated by F. Murray Abraham, is a swift, sometimes funny and always compelling record of an experience that became richly rewarding but seemed at times like a horrifying comedy of crossed signals and conflicting ambitions.

"It captures the challenges and frustrations and triumphs of the process," says A.R.T.'s artistic director, Allen Nause, who co-directed Shakespeare's play with Vietnam's Doan Hoàng Giang. "When I watch it, it feels like I'm living it all over again."

Part of the film's drama comes from the messy battle of wills that goes along with the making of any collaborative creative art. Much comes from the continuing misunderstandings between two cultures whose main point of mutual reference is still the years when they were at war. And some comes from the unspoken but inevitable question lurking backstage: If it's this hard for people from two cultures to agree on something they all *want* to do, how hard must it be for two countries to negotiate on the really tough matters?

"I just had to accept the fact that there are some enormous cultural differences," Nause says.

Good diplomats understand that there is often a wide gap between what they think they know and what they actually know. "The thing that kept surprising me is that very often we *thought* we were on the same page," Nause recalls. "One day I'd think, 'Well, I handled that pretty well.' And then the next day I'd discover I was 180 degrees off."

On both sides, surprise was an everyday companion.

Lorelle Browning, a passionate Shakespearean at Pacific University in Forest Grove who spent years organizing the project through her group Vietnam America Theater Exchange, was devoted to the play's words.

Giang, a strong-willed, nearly legendary figure in Vietnamese theater, was determined to create a visual spectacle built on the bones of Shakespeare's plot.

Nause often found himself somewhere in the middle — and, often enough, unaware of something really big until the last minute.

With just two weeks of rehearsal left, Giang announced that he wanted the mischief-maker Puck to have a cadre of six fairies at his beck and call — a major design and staging complication.

Browning exploded. Giang dug in his heels. Nause negotiated.

"It wasn't the idea of the thing so much," Nause recalls, "as how we learned about it. Ultimately I think his ideas worked pretty well."

Other snags, such as the flustering stage kiss, arose from differing cultural customs. Vietnamese are much more conservative than Americans about shows of public affection; on stage the custom is for actors to mime a kiss, not actually do one.

Work habits were a big issue, with the Americans eager to get things done efficiently and the Vietnamese suspicious of the tightly prearranged time schedule.

"One of the biggest things for me is, where are our values?" Nause says. "For Americans it often seems to be work: What can we knock off our list today? In Vietnam it's just very different. Family comes first.

"At first I think the Vietnamese were just baffled by the American way of working. But I think we grew to an understanding of each other's way of working."

Then there was the Great Clinton Letdown.

Political relations between the two countries had just been normalized, and the president and first lady were touring Vietnam. Word came that they might attend "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The Vietnamese seemed excited. A Clinton emissary came to see the company and was enthusiastic. Television crews from CNN, ABC and elsewhere began to show up.

Then, right before opening, the bottom fell out. The Clintons wouldn't be there, after all — and "Midsummer" was going to have to move out of Hanoi's ornate Opera House, the city's most prestigious performance hall, to make way for a more traditional Vietnamese show that the Clintons would attend.

"It was a psychological blow," Nause remembers, "to go off with our tails between our legs and have to find another theater space."

But find one they did — and the show went on. One of the sweetest moments in "A Dream in Hanoi" comes when Weidlinger's camera pans over the audience and reveals a sea of shining faces, rapt, caught up in pleasure over a story they'd never seen before.

"I loved the production," Nause says. "All of my ideas were there, and all of Lorelle's ideas were there; and all of Mr. Giang's ideas were there. That's what you hope for in a collaboration."

The documentary ends on another sweet note, perhaps the most telling of the entire tale. As the show's run concludes, the Vietnamese and American partners embrace and shed genuine tears at parting, difficulties forgotten in the warmth of understanding and affection.

It is an ending — and a beginning. Next season, a Vietnamese set designer and a marketing expert from the "Midsummer" team will come to Portland to work on projects at A.R.T. And in November, Nause, Browning and stage manager Stephanie Mulligan will return to Vietnam on a Ford Foundation-sponsored retreat to help figure out what their next joint project will be.

"I've created such good friends," Nause says, "that I'll be going back for years."

IF YOU GO

A Dream in Hanoi

Where: Northwest Film Center at Whitsell Auditorium, Portland Art Museum, 1219 S.W. Park Ave.

When: 7 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 4:30 p.m. Sunday, July 21

Admission: $8.50

Entertaining 'Dream' within 'Dream'

"A Dream in Hanoi"
★★★

This is one of those documentaries that greatly surpasses the promise of its subject matter, in this case a joint U.S.-Vietnamese production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," produced as a gesture of international goodwill in Hanoi.

Director Tom Weidlinger managed to hang around the two troupes — one from Portland, Ore., the other the Central Theater Company of Vietnam — until he became the confidant of both. As a result, he captured backstage dramatics (fuming leading ladies! weeping producers! disgusted fairies!) that even Shakespeare would have admired.

Short**TAKES**

Friction sets in almost immediately between the two former wartime adversaries, demonstrating that the term "drama queen" is not indigenously American. When the leading lady gives a boisterous, thoroughly Western interpretation of Helena in one of the early rehearsals, the Vietnamese director is outraged. "A Vietnamese man could never love a woman who acts like this," he says, suggesting a more subservient characterization. When Weidlinger repeats the remark to the actress, she replies tartly, "When he plays Helena, he can get on *his* knees and beg."

The two groups remain divided on practically everything until they receive their costumes, which both sides hate with equal passion. This is at least a light at the end of the tunnel in the peace process, and after several more setbacks that nearly scuttle the production, they reach a tearful truce by the time the curtain goes up.

No MPAA rating. 1 hour, 31 minutes.

(Weidlinger will appear at San Jose's Towne 3 Theatre Sunday to introduce the first evening show.)

— Bruce Newman
Mercury News

MOIRA PRODUCTIONS

Kristen Brown plays the part of Helena in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the documentary "A Dream in Hanoi."

A Dream in Hanoi Berkeley documentarian Tom Weidlinger's latest film observes the first production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Vietnam, produced as a bilingual collaboration between that country's renowned Central Dramatic Company and the Artistic Repertory Theater of Portland, Ore. Doãn Hoáng Giang, the great Vietnamese director half in charge of this venture, describes it as "like two men married to the same wife." That's a plot with nearly Shakespearean potential, or much worse; everyone, including Weidlinger, took it on faith that the project would transcend the awkward, shamefaced inequity of cultural polygamy, and so it does. Theater's language is universal, we're reminded, and so are the vicissitudes of play-making. With a lost venue, meddling censors, the disappointing lack of interest of a visiting American president, and the usual vanities and obstinate wills of artistic personalities to contend with, all the expected political ghosts seem miraculously to evaporate. Weidlinger avoids partisanship without avoiding engagement; he doesn't come off as a theater fetishist, a Shakespeare scholar, or a patriot, but he does quietly take the stance of a committed advocate for imaginative border crossings. He allows his subjects to incriminate and venerate themselves in what seem like the right proportions. It's heartening to know that the Vietnamese "tradition of shyness" and the American tradition (à la MTV's *Jackass*) of braying for attention can be irksome and endearing — and, for creative purposes, mutually beneficial. (Jonathan Kiefer) *Opera Plaza, Shattuck*