

# **Women & Vovinam Việt Võ Đạo**



# Who are we?

We are Anne-Sophie Liban and Matthias Fortune, actors and directors. For eight years now, we have been working and traveling together. We have been fortunate to explore Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, and finally Vietnam. The experience of the last trip was particularly memorable: it was in February/March 2020 when the country was already halfway barricaded due to the beginning of the pandemic.

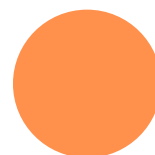
For some years, we had the desire to undertake an artistic project in Asia as our instincts always drew us back to this vast continent. But where? We did not have an answer to this question yet, and perhaps we were not allowing ourselves to ask it seriously. With Vietnam, it joyfully imposed itself. It was obvious. It's the country where we felt that staying there is earned, and we wanted to be part of it. We discovered remnants of the French language, observed the youth dancing in the streets of Đà Nẵng, met Bảo, a young doctor who is also a restaurant manager at night, visited the Museum of Women in Hanoi, exchanged with residents with disabilities at Tĩnh Trúc Gia (The Peaceful Bamboos: a welcoming community in Huế), visited Réhahn's Precious Heritage Museum in Hội An, and were particularly struck by the personality of Vietnamese women!

Returning five days before France went into lockdown, the idea of going back to Vietnam and creating an artistic project there never left us. In the meantime, a major event occurred: the birth of our son, whom we named Bao... Vietnam was indeed firmly in our thoughts.

We continued our activities in France, including organizing the "F.A.T. Festival" (Foule Au Théâtre) since 2015, an annual cultural event aimed at making theater accessible in all its forms in a rural area with limited cultural offerings. Additionally, we lead the company "Le Homard Bleu", producing shows exploring various themes, from classical repertoire to contemporary writing, addressing topics such as social relations, feminism, and artistic freedom. In our latest work (currently in progress), "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and and of Jackie Chan," we talk about childhood(s), kung-fu, and Cantonese pop.

In January 2023, while in the midst of the Balinese rice fields with our one-and-a-half-year-old son, a man turns to us. He heard our discussion about our desire to develop a project in Vietnam. It's Thomas Andrea Barbey, a visual artist and former resident of Villa Saigon, who then shares with us his particularly exciting experience of artistic residencies in Vietnam. Since then, we have submitted our project to Villa Saigon and are thrilled to be among the laureates. This will allow us to stay in Ho Chi Minh City and develop our performative project for a duration of 8 weeks between January and May 2024.

Today, we are seeking financial partners and connections with Franco-Vietnamese cultural services to enable our project to unfold harmoniously.



# The project

**Meeting a master of Vovinam Việt Võ Đạo: the story of a woman through her practice of martial arts, presented in a theatrical and martial performance.**

As mentioned earlier, we were particularly impressed by the personalities of Vietnamese women during our 2020 trip. In addition to the strong impression made by cigar-smoking women (attributes generally associated with men in our Western eyes), we witnessed their significant role in family decision-making. Thanks to Réhahn, the founder of the Precious Heritage Museum in Hoi An, we learned that some ethnic groups contributing to Vietnam's cultural diversity, especially those living in the Central Highlands such as the Rhade, Ede, Bahnar, K'Ho, or Jarai, have preserved a matrilineal system. Among these memorable encounters, Trinh's stands out:

"During our trip, Matthias experienced cervical vertebrae blockage (which happens to him regularly) before taking the train between Huế and Đà Nẵng. In the carriage along the splendid coastal landscapes, he was trying to relax by stretching his back. A woman in her fifties, sitting next to us, seemed to silently observe us. Then, without warning, she approached him and advised a posture to relieve his neck. She began to vigorously massage his neck while I looked at him with a mixture of amusement and astonishment. Her technique must have been effective because he did feel much better (or maybe it was her direct approach!) We then talked. Her name was Trinh, and though she spoke little English, through body language, she conveyed that she was from Ho Chi Minh City and a dedicated practitioner of Vovinam. She emphasized the importance of her practice in her life as a woman and expressed her desire to teach the martial art by opening a school. It was a joyful and lively conversation where she showed us videos on her smartphone of martial arts competitions she had participated in. When we disembarked at Đà Nẵng station, she continued south on the train. We said goodbye without daring to ask for her contact!"

Anne-Sophie

"We would have loved to continue this exchange, especially since Trinh's story was fascinating. Was it possible to find her again? This encounter deeply marked us, especially since we are sensitive to martial arts practice: Anne-Sophie practices Qi Gong, and Matthias practices Kung-fu. Thus, an idea sprouted in our minds: to meet a practitioner, a teacher, or a master of Vovinam and narrate their journey through a theatrical-martial performance."

# Documentary investigation and martial practice

Our proposal is to structure this residency in the form of a documentary "investigation" aiming to culminate in a public representation based on the testimonials we will have collected, along with the experiences shared during our research. This investigative approach stems from Anne-Sophie's training at the International School of Jacques Lecoq, a school of movement and mime. As performing artists, we constantly need to immerse ourselves in new experiences, and this time, we have chosen to immerse ourselves for 8 weeks in a Vovinam school.

During this working period, we aim to establish connections with female practitioners of Vovinam Việt Võ Đạo to build a framework upon which we can improvise while concurrently conducting documentary work. Our goal is also to undergo practical training with a master or teacher of this martial art to capture the gestures and inherent power of this discipline, through choreographed combat scenes between a woman and a man. Humor will play a significant role in our approach, as we have been exploring burlesque physical language since our early performances, particularly in the creation of slapstick combat scenes. This form of visual and physical humor relies on absurd situations and exaggerated gestures, akin to the performances of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, or Jackie Chan.

**Our story will revolve around an encounter. An encounter with a woman who shares her story and her practice of Vovinam. What do martial arts represent for her? What motivated her to engage in them? Has it liberated her in any way? Through a testimony blending fiction and reality, image and physical language, we will narrate significant moments in the life of a Vietnamese woman through the prism of her martial practice.**



# Restitution

For the public presentation of our project at the end of the residency, we envision interpreted testimonials in the form of several monologues punctuated by choreographed martial sequences. We also consider incorporating some of the collected materials, such as voice recordings or videos. Depending on the connections established during the research period, we might consider inviting a Vovinam Việt Võ Đạo practitioner to join us during the public presentation.

Moreover, the work accomplished during this residency paves the way for future performances in France at various festivals, including "Les Rencontres de Theizé" and the F.A.T. Festival in the summer of 2024. This research also serves as the foundation for an ambitious project that we plan to further develop in France and, hopefully, in other countries: "Money Moon, the (mis)adventures of two friends across Asia".

**By narrating the story of Vietnamese women through Vovinam Việt Võ Đạo, we aim, at our humble level, to shine a light on the journeys of these inspiring women and this martial art deeply rooted in the country's history. We invite you to share in this momentum with us through your support for artists' mobility, by choosing to support our project.**



**Thank you**

