

Stories by the Bay: OLLI: Spring 2022: Weeks 5 & 6:

week 5: DIM SUM: A LITTLE BIT OF HEART: 1985:

Roger Ebert's 1985 review of the film:

Director Wayne Wang says his favorite image in *Dim Sum* is the sight of the shoes left outside the living-room door in the Tam household in San Francisco's Chinatown. They are Western shoes, taken off as the characters enter a home that is still run according to Chinese values by old Mrs. Tam, a sweet widow with a strong but quietly concealed will. After the success of *Chan Is Missing*, his first slice-of-life about Chinese-Americans, Wang was looking for another story, and when he saw some shoes left outside a Chinese home, he knew he had his viewpoint, and only had to create his characters.



He has created some unforgettable ones, including Mrs. Tam (Kim Chew), a 60ish woman whose husband is dead and whose children have left home, all except for the youngest daughter; Geraldine Tam (Laureen Chew), the daughter, who says she wants to get married but feels she should stay with her mother, and Uncle Tam (Victor Wong), a jolly, worldly bartender who would marry Mrs. Tam if Geraldine would only get out of the way.

These three characters dance a subtle little emotional ballet during the film, as we gradually become aware of their true motives. Mrs. Tam is given to sadly shaking her head and bemoaning the fact that her daughter is 30 and still single, but there are clues that she enjoys the fact that Geraldine has stayed at home with her. That way, she will not have to deal with Uncle Tam, who, for that matter, may only be paying lip service to his desire to marry her. Meanwhile, Geraldine has a boyfriend in Los Angeles who has been waiting patiently to marry her, and perhaps Geraldine uses her mother as an excuse to avoid the idea of marriage.

What is remarkable is the way Wang deals with this complex set of emotions, in a movie that is essentially a comedy. Some of the scenes in *Dim Sum* are as quietly funny as anything I've seen this year, especially Mrs. Tam's birthday party, a long conversation she has over the back fence with a neighbor, and the way Uncle Tam effortlessly mixes his Chinese wisdom with the lessons he has learned as a bartender.

The movie is not heavily plotted, and that's good; a heavy hand would spoil this fragile material. Wang's camera enters quietly and observes as his characters lead their lives, trying to find a compromise between too much loneliness and too much risk. At the end, everyone is more or less happy, and more or less sad, and in this movie that is satisfactory.

Note: Although this is no doubt not what Wang had in mind, I couldn't help thinking, as I watched *Dim Sum*, that the movie's characters and situations could be effortlessly spun off into a wonderful TV sitcom.

week 6: THE LAST BLACK MAN IN SAN FRANCISCO: 1974:

Stephanie Zacharek's review of the film from *Time* magazine:

“Where, or what, is home? That question has as many answers as there are humans to ponder it. In *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, Joe Talbot's odd and wonderful debut film, two young black men, best friends and natives of that often romanticized yet deeply complicated city, take a semi-dilapidated Victorian house under their wing. It has special meaning for one of them, Jimmie (Jimmie Fails), whose grandfather built the house in 1946—or so Jimmie believes. Jimmie's family lost the house years ago; it's now owned by a high-strung, middle-aged white woman with no sense of its past beyond its obvious, aged beauty. (Its high market value, given its prime Fillmore District location, is a given.)

“Jimmie and his friend Montgomery (Jonathan Majors), a soulful writer and artist who seems transplanted from another era—his uniform is the loose tweed jacket and sock-and-sandal combo of a Beat-era bohemian—visit the house with religious regularity. Jimmie often brings paint to touch up the house's fading exterior trim, while avoiding the house's cranky owner. His devotion to the house is meditative, representing not just his own childhood memories but a sense of belonging that goes back generations. The house also fuels his love of beauty. Glass light fixtures that dip down like lazy, benevolent tulips, Art Deco cigarette boxes shaped like champagne bottles: he and Montgomery share a deep, unspoken ardor for the past, understanding how old, whispered secrets live on in objects.



“It would be correct to call *The Last Black Man* a story about gentrification, but that word hardly captures the movie's mystery and its heartbeat. (The story is by Talbot and Fails, based on Fails' own experience; Talbot wrote the script with Rob Richert.) This isn't just a story about displaced communities, it's about displaced souls, people so connected to history that they never feel quite at home in the present. Majors and Fails give fine performances here, in tune with each other but also with the pulse of the city that surrounds them, a universe of tech hipsters, of old-style hippies, of black kids hanging out on the streets of their own neighborhoods, far from the places where big money is made or spent. *This* is San Francisco now, but its neighborhoods—and its houses—harbor truths that can't be signified in dollar signs.”