

BY LIBBY TUDBALL

Sadness

A Monologue by William Yang **Study Guide**

Award winning photographer William Yang explores issues of grief, family and identity in this adaptation of his acclaimed stage performance, *Sadness*.





Sadness will be of interest to senior students and teachers of: Media Studies, Visual Arts, Photography, Cultural Studies, Studies of Society and Environment or Human Society and Environment, Health and Human Development, Drama and English.

Michael Roche notes:

In Sadness (1999), a new documentary from Tony Ayres, photographer William Yang metaphorically travels through a harsh and dangerous landscape. He is constantly on the move, either between cultures, states of being or in a Toyota with a Holden motor, heading from the present to the past ... Sadness is a very spiritual journey that sees Yang trying to unify his sexuality and ethnicity within the universal experience of grief.

- Roche's description of *Sadness* presents his particular view of the film. Immediately after watching the film, write or present a report expressing your personal reaction to the film and views on what the film is about.
- In forming your impressions, think about these questions: How would you describe the genre of the film? Did you enjoy the film? Why or why not? What emotions did you experience as you watched the film? What do you think the film is about? What words would you use to describe the film?
- Ask several members of the class to read or present their reactions. In what ways are your reactions the same or different?
- Now read the following short descriptions of the film, taken from the film slick cover:

In Sadness, William Yang embarks on two journeys. The first is a pilgrimage to far North Queensland to investigate the murder of his uncle Fang Yuen. Along the

way, Yang discovers why his mother was at such pains to deny his Chinese heritage and assimilate his family into Australian culture. The second is a journey into grief, in which Yang relates stories of friends who have died of AIDS. 'When I reread my diaries from the early nineties, I saw that I had been to more wakes than parties. I felt compelled to tell these stories of my friends, to unburden myself of the things that I have seen'.

Sadness is a mesmerising, poetic montage of story-telling, photography and stylised re-enactment, which brings to life the stories of William Yang's family and friends. In Sadness these two threads are delicately and skilfully woven together to create an elegiac and intensely moving documentary sustained by William Yang's compassionate witness.

- Did your class members emphasise any other aspects of the film in your descriptions?
- In your view, is the film a pilgrimage? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think Yang's mother denies her family's Chinese heritage?
- What is assimilation? What are the personal costs and benefits for people of varied cultural heritages who try to assimilate into the mainstream culture?
- It could be argued that it has always been difficult for people to assimilate in Australia because it is so hard to define mainstream Australian culture. How can it be defined today?
- As a class, talk about experiences where people have unburdened sad experiences to help them accept and cope with what has happened.
- Think about and discuss other examples of books or films with this focus.

• What other kinds of life experiences do people need to share? What are the rituals and social behaviours we use to share experiences?

• What do you think is meant by the description of the film as an 'elegiac documentary'?

Visit <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP397mpeg7.html> to read more about elegiac art.

• Is it accurate to describe the film as a monologue?

In *Sadness*, Yang says, 'all my performances begin with photographs. First I take the slides, which I push around my light box, then the words come.' Yang is a story-teller, and it could be said that this role of telling tales is at the heart of his artistic practice. The film is an adaptation of the stage performance of the same name.

- In what ways do you think *Sadness* would be different in live performance rather than on film?
- What aspects of the story could allow for both versions to work successfully?
- Sometimes when people see a film that has been previously available as a book, they say they prefer the book. If this 'film text' was presented as a series of pictures and stories in a 'written text', do you think the impact of *Sadness* would be as powerful? Explain your answer.

About William Yang

William Yang has a strong presence in the film. We learn a great deal about his personal life, feelings and concerns. As a class, write a biography of William Yang using the following technique. Each member of the class should jot down phrases they remember about Yang from the film. Then share your ideas to build the biography. Think about the following:

- What does Yang tell us about why he wanted this film to be made?
- What is the purpose of the various photographs?
- What is Yang's family background? How many children are in his family? Who are his sisters and brothers, who have they married, and where do they live?
- What were his parents' hopes

- Do you agree with this description? Have you included this perspective in your autobiographies?

Sadness and AIDS

An essential element of William Yang's *Sadness* is the recording of the lives and memories of friends he lost through HIV/AIDS illnesses in the early '90s. The sense of overwhelming sad-

- If you wish to learn more about AIDS and HIV, refer to the references in the further activities section of this guide.

Allan's Story

The first story we see and hear in *Sadness* is Allan's story. While visiting an old friend in St Vincent's Hospital, Yang sees Allan, an ex-lover from years ago, in the AIDS ward. Allan has changed. He seems like an old man.

- How do we know that Allan has AIDS?
- What do the slides tell us about the physical impact of AIDS?
- How do you feel when you see photographs of Allan taken earlier in his life?

Peter Tully

Yang clearly wishes to pay tribute to Peter Tully's talent and create a pictorial memorial of Peter. He was a zany and colourful friend who lived with David McDiarmid for over twenty years. Yang tells us that the retrospective exhibition of Tully's work held at the Australian National Gallery was the first time an exhibition of this kind was held while the artist was still living.

- All of Yang's friends react differently and in their own personal way to the news that they have AIDS. How does Peter cope with the news?
- Yang says that Peter's bus trip with the theme 'The Tragic Tourist', is 'too close to home to be comfortable'. What do you think he means?

David McDiarmid

David desperately wanted more time to do more in life. Yang remarks, 'but David, we always want more time'.

- In what ways would it be particularly difficult to know that you have a terminal illness?
- How does Yang and the filmmaker show us that Peter Tully and David McDiarmid were intensely talented men?



William Yang projects a slide of his friend Allan, whose story forms part of William's monologue performance in *Sadness*

- and wishes for their children?
- When did Yang's father die?
- What do the photographs tell us about William Yang?
- What does Yang mean in describing himself as a 'social photographer'?
- What are Yang's opinions, thoughts and values as expressed through the film?
- Form small groups to consider different points and then share your views.

The executive producer of *Sadness*, Megan McMurchy, sees Yang as a 'sober, reflective fifty year-old man of great wisdom ... He has arrived at a true connection with his Chinese heritage that I think he rejected in his youth. In a way, he's circled back further than his own parents who didn't pass on their Chinese heritage'.

ness about AIDS deaths is one that many artists have attempted to capture not only in film, but in song, in poetry, paintings and novels. Yang takes us on a journey through the series of photographs that he took during his friends' illnesses. He leaves us at the end with a picture of each individual when they were well, which records a positive image to end, in a way, the sadness.

Many people who have AIDS may not have visible symptoms of the HIV infection for up to ten years. HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This virus attacks the body leaving it defenceless and unable to fight other infections and cancers, which can then cause death. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and is a group of symptoms thought to be caused by HIV. HIV is transmitted by blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk.

- How does Yang create a tribute to them both?

Nicolaas

Nicolaas and William Yang had worked together in the past on the production of a few posters. Yang asked Nicolaas if he could photograph him during his illness to record his memory.

- What do we learn about AIDS from the photographs of

AIDS apparition, with volcanic eruptions on his head. Three weeks later he died.

- How does Scotty cope with being AIDS-afflicted?
- Why do you think Scotty finally chose suicide as the way to end his suffering?

Scotty worked and lived with his close friend Peter Kingston, 'Kingo', who made a quilt in Scotty's memory.

gether with others. The AIDS Memorial Quilt project in the USA is now the largest ongoing community arts project in the world.

- Find out more about the special AIDS quilt tributes by visiting

http://www.jbu.edu/abcquilts/text/abchist_text.htm

or <http://www.AIDSQuilt.org>

Also watch *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*, directed by Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman in 1989.

Identity

In order to understand the theme of identity explored in the film, you need to firstly think about what factors influence your sense of identity, and how we become the people we are. Some influences can include:

- ethnicity
- where you were born and where you now live
- heritage
- culture
- parents and family origins
- gender
- sexuality and relationships
- religion
- social life and groups you belong to
- leisure activities
- a sense of difference

Suggest other influences not included in this list. What do you think are the main influences on William Yang's sense of identity?

Probably the hardest influence to understand is the 'sense of difference'. Yang feels different because he is Chinese and he is gay. Both of these identities are 'different' from mainstream culture, even though diversity is generally more accepted in the 1990s. Yang's identity has obviously changed through his life as the influences changed over time. In Tony Ayres's previous documentary, *China Dolls* (1997), 'a number of men discuss the experience of being Chinese at a gay party, places where appearances mean everything'. Being Chinese, ac-



Pinau Ghee plays a 'Kanak man' working in North Queensland canefields in a scene re-enacted for *Sadness*.

Nicolaas?

Nicolaas is particularly attached to a grass plant he has grown in his backyard.

- Why do you think this plant becomes so significant to Nicolaas?
- Nicolaas at forty years of age is able to cope with the AIDS illness more calmly than other sufferers. Why do you think this was possible?

Scotty

Scotty had a lot of fears to deal with as he was dying. He feared hospitals and worried that if he died at home he would have to be carried past the Indian restaurant next door. Yet the film shows us that Scotty also wishes to declare that he has AIDS. We see Scotty at the 1990 Mardi Gras, dressed as an

Yang is particularly moved by the thought of how many hours and how much love Kingo put into the memorial quilt to Scotty.

AIDS Quilts

Many thousands of people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses all over the world have been remembered by their loved ones through AIDS quilts which have been hand-made by families and members of the communities where people have died of AIDS. The Quilts Project was originally initiated by Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who organised for quilts to be made for HIV/AIDS infected babies to bring love and comfort to little ones and support and compassion for their care-givers. Today, many quilts are made with panels remembering individuals joined to-



according to one man, means 'people look through you,' while another man complains about the patronising and often unwanted advances of the so-called rice queens.

- By the end of the film, do you have a sense that Yang is now more comfortable with his identity?

- Yang also talks to us about important shared experiences: being part of a large extended family that has multiple identities and sharing the grief and loss of loved ones with friends. What experiences do you share with members of your family that increase your common identity?

- In what situations do you feel different? Look back at the list of possible factors influencing identity. Do you feel different when some of these factors you confront in a daily situation are very different from your normal experience? Firstly, think about this question yourself, and then share your thoughts with others, perhaps in a small group.

William's Family Story

Sadness is a story about Yang's journey into his own Chinese family history and the wider 'family' of the gay community. The film, and the photographs in it, immortalise the various members of his family. The concept of family has changed greatly in recent decades, and this reality is clearly evident in *Sadness*, where the family spirit and connectedness of the gay community is so evident, particularly in the common experience of grief. 'Families' are no longer necessarily based on the old-fashioned heterogeneous unit of mother, father and children. There is far more diversity in the family unit. People in de facto relationships, same-sex couples and blended families are now commonplace and accepted in our community.

- Gather information about family structures from books, journals or the Internet, including statistics and discussion on the concept of families.

Yang says that in 1990 he began his research into the Chinese in Aus-

tralia's changing identity?

When Yang goes to visit his Auntie Kath he is given a delicacy, crabmeat on Sao biscuits.

- How might other families from other cultures celebrate the visit of a relative?



William Yang (centre) commemorates friends lost to AIDS at a candlelight vigil.

tralia. He was interested in finding out more about his Chinese heritage, perhaps partly because his mother had tried to deny and exclude that part of her children's identity. The film tells us a great deal about Yang's relationship with his mother and her experiences as a Chinese Australian.

The mood is very different in the sections of the film focussing on Yang's family story.

- How does the film depict Yang's childhood experiences of racism? In particular, which scenes convey this? How?

- How would you describe the mood in the scene when William is driving Shirli into Brisbane?

- How do you think William felt about meeting his extended family at Innisfail? Yang's visit to his cousin Christine in Queensland leads to another round of photographs. What story do these photographs tell about Austral-

The Murder of Fang Yuen

The story of the murder of Yang's uncle, Fang Yuen in the 1920s, is handled with a mixture of seriousness and humour.

- What are the different theories about how he was killed? As a class, record the different stories and then re-enact them. Which story seems the most likely?

At Innisfail Court House, Yang discovers that the murder of Fang Yuen was not over a card game or a gambling debt, but over the weight of sugar cane that went into a railway truck. The man who was alleged to have shot him, Peter Danelchenko, was acquitted.

- Why were the Chinese in the district so bitter about the outcome of the trial?

- In what way does the outcome of the story of Fang Yuen's murder add credence to Yang's view that 'being Chinese in this coun-

try was not only undesirable but dangerous'?

- What does the film tell us about racism towards Chinese people in Australia?

Chinese in Australia

Chinese people first came to Australia as contract pastoral workers in the 1830s and '40s. In the 1850s more than 40,000 Chinese arrived in the hope of making their fortunes in the gold fields. Many nineteenth century Australians



Peter Danelchenko (Richard Cotter) shoots and kills William Yang's uncle Fang Yuen in *Sadness*.

appreciated the Chinese contributions to Australian society — they pioneered market gardens and established themselves as merchants, cooks and furniture makers. However, the Chinese were sometimes resented because their cultural practices were different, and they often found gold in the 'tailings' left behind by European miners. At times anti-Chinese feeling reached riot proportions, the most famous incident being the Lambing Flat riots in NSW in 1861. There were also protests when, in the late 1880s, Chinese were employed as cheap shearers ('scab labour') at a time when the economy was in decline. This fueled anti-Chinese sentiment in many Australian cities, despite their small Chinese populations. In 1901, the first act of the newly formed Federal parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act, which restricted

Asian immigration to Australia. The act was law until 1972 when the Whitlam government put an end to the racist policy.

Media Studies / Photography / Visual Arts

The production notes for *Sadness* tell us that the film was shot in 1998, 'using a combination of studio narration, dramatised tableaux, slides from the original stage show, back pro-

jection and footage from the sugar-cane country in Queensland where some of the story takes place'.

- What challenges would this form of production create for the film-makers?
- Draw a flowchart of the various scenes in the film to construct a record of the scenes in the film and to demonstrate how the film is structured.

At the beginning of the film, Yang's face emerges from the darkness as he turns around and looks directly into the camera.

- Comment on how the film-maker creates a certain feeling and mood.
- What techniques are used to connect the various scenes and move between stories?

- Comment on the mood and feelings created at the end of the film.

William Yang's role has been described as a 'mesmeric screen presence' in the film. The executive producer says that: 'William casts a spell through his deceptively simple story-telling style, and the success of the piece was always contingent on keeping the flow of his voice throughout'.

- Write a short piece explaining the importance of Yang's role to the success of the film.

There are particular styles used in the telling of Yang's family story.

- In what ways is the approach of the film-maker 'lighter' in the sections on the family than in the presentation of the sad AIDS stories?
- Why do you think the studio reenactments were included?

Michael Roche says that 'Yang has written about the importance of simply being there, at a particular event or place, in order to capture the moment. He sees himself, quite humbly, as a privileged visual chronicler of our times'.

- While you are watching the film, make a list of particular still images that have an impact on you. In what ways could they be interpreted as social records of Australian society? Compare the list you have made with other members of the class.

Music

- At the start of the film, haunting music is used to create a mood. Music is used most effectively throughout the film to create certain moods and feelings. Watch the film again to record the use of music. List the various styles and techniques. Notice particularly how Oriental-influenced music is used.
- What theme is used to introduce the Queensland excerpts?



Grief

Sadness is a study of unresolved grief. Yang says that in the film, the two sides of his story, the Chinese and the gay, came together through grief: 'I spoke at Allan's funeral and I read the eulogy at my mother's. The two strands of my story, the gay and the Chinese side, had come together over the common experiences of grief'. But he also says, 'we should not try to pull them back to this physical world with our sadness; let them go, they have a journey to travel'. Yang's view is that 'the true self is a spirit which never dies and is eternal ... At death a journey begins to the next world ... loved ones are never lost, they are always there in the heart'.

- In what ways did the film affect you emotionally?
- As a class, discuss the concept of grief and the various ways that it can affect people.
- What experiences can help people resolve grief?

Near the end of the film, Yang tells us the story of the death of his mother. Audiences comment that they find this part of the film particularly moving.

- Describe what happens in this part of the story.
- List some of the images the film-maker uses to visually describe the events at the end of William's mother's life.
- How does Yang make it easier for us to accept her death?
- How do we know that Yang values his Chinese identity at the end of the film?

Chinese philosopher, Lao Tze said:

There is no difference between the living and the dead. Loved ones are never lost, they are always there in the heart.

Further Activities, Research and Reading

- Identify those images or moments that stand out in your memory after viewing the film. Analyse whether it is the visual impact, the emotional impact, something Yang says, or some other factor which makes that moment so memorable. Compare your notes with other class members.
- Write a full review of *Sadness* for a critical film magazine.
- In order to write an autobiographical piece about some episode/s in your life or someone you know, select a series of pictures that tell a story and weave them into your writing. You could create a Powerpoint story and scan in the pictures for your presentation, or present your story as a short dramatisation to other members of the class.
- Make a short film of your presentation.
- If you have very little knowledge of the impact of the AIDS virus, gather information from books, journals and the Internet. Your research could explore: how the AIDS virus is contracted, how the risk of contracting AIDS can

be minimised, and what support services are available for AIDS victims.

These sites are starting points for your investigations:

<https://www.afao.org.au/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC88977/>

- Do some research to find out more about Chinese families in Australia.
- Read Timothy Conigrave's posthumously published book, *Holding the Man*, which records the slow death of his lover with AIDS.
- Think about the representation of queer sexuality and AIDS in popular music. Listen to Bruce Springsteen's song, *Streets of Philadelphia*, featured in the 1993 AIDS film, *Philadelphia*. (*Greatest Hits*, Columbia (Sony), 1995.) Listen to the Pet Shop Boys' song, *The Survivors*, from the album, *Bilingual*. (Parlophone (EMI), 1996.) ■

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