

Why Did He Correct My Memory?

by Catherine Filloux

ដោយសារបានទទួលនូវអាហារូបករណ៍ និងវេសនដ្ឋានសម្រាប់អ្នកនិពន្ធ ដែលក្រុមប្រឹក្សាវប្បធម៌អាស៊ីជ្រុលឲ្យ កាលពីដើមឆ្នាំ ២០០១ នេះ ខ្ញុំក៏ធ្វើដំណើរទៅក្រុងភ្នំពេញ ប្រទេសកម្ពុជា ។ ក្នុងស្ថេរវេលាពីរខែកន្លះស្នាក់នៅទីនេះ ខ្ញុំបានសម្តែង

ជាមួយសិល្បករខ្មែរ ដែលមកពីក្រុមល្ខោនជាតិ និង ធ្វើការស្រាវជ្រាវសម្រាប់ឈុតរឿងថ្មីរបស់ខ្ញុំ មានចំណងជើងថា “ភាពស្ងៀមស្ងាត់របស់ព្រះអាទិទេព - Silence of God” ដែលនឹងជំលិតនៅប្រទេសអាមេរិកាំង នារដូវក្តៅខាងមុខនេះ ។

On the first day we meet in the red-curtained theater of the French Cultural Center, the actors slip off their shoes at the bottom of the stairs and we sit in a circle on the gray-carpeted stage. We go around the circle to say our names. My interpreter, Domnang Pin, a visual artist who graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts translates for me, as I tell the actors that I've been writing plays about Cambodia for the past ten years. My plays and oral history are passed around the circle and the actors look at my writing.

Seng, runs onstage--ducking, hiding behind a bush, calling, gesturing downward with his hands, urging his friend to hide. He unwraps some food from his krama, his scarf, fearfully checking the perimeters, stuffing his mouth, his being, his life. What is the food? I ask Dom.

Potatoes

Eleven of the actors and actresses are from Mao Keng's National Theatre, the only professional troupe of modern theater actors in the country. One actress is from the Royal University of Fine Arts and one actor is a Khmer survivor, artist and activist, who divides his time between Lowell, Massachusetts and Cambodia. As we sit in the circle I say to the actors that I have found, through the years, that I like to write what's close to my heart. "If you were going to die tomorrow what would you write?" I ask. I demonstrate that it would be better if they act out the story, rather than tell it as a narrator from the third person, by kneeling and pretending to comfort an imaginary baby, holding the baby close. I talk a little about how a character can change through a scene and how that can be dramatically more interesting than no change, though that is entirely debatable. This isn't a class: I have so much to learn from them. We break from the circle and the actors take some time to think about what they will write about. We go around the circle and each briefly says what he or she has decided. Some change their minds and pick something new. We break for lunch around eleven.

Bunron pounds his chest, gasping for air. His friend, who is invisible Bunron is doing this all alone-tells him he will steal some more potatoes tonight. In the field in the distance they look out at us in the audience. We are now armed guards with scythes, swords, knives, sickles. What is the word? I nod to Dom. I understand. We sit further down in our seats. The words Dom whispers I don't want to hear. Bunron tells his friend, "No, don't go, tonight. You stole today, they'll kill you this time." The friend, the invisible one beside him, says, "What does it matter? To die of starvation or from their blade?" Bunron makes a strong case for him not to go. I watch. Bunron asks, who will take care of his friend's old mother? Right there on stage I begin to see his friend.

After lunch, around two, the actors come back holding their papers: some are folded into squares, some in notebooks, some with words all the way to the very edge of the paper, as if to save on precious space. There is a kind of nervous hush. I sit next to my interpreter Dom, whose mouth is very close to my ear. He feeds me the words in English in a furtive whisper as the first actor, Bunron

The friend does go to the field to steal more potatoes. Bunron watches him. We watch Bunron. After he is finished, Bunron bows to us and makes his way down the stairs. At the bottom he puts his shoes back on. I get up from my seat and hug him. It is not done for a woman like me to hug him, in Khmer culture, but he is gracious and accepts it. And I tell Bunron that I love him for what he is done with such beauty and courage. Dom translates. Bunron nods. He makes the same movement and expression he will always make: one of accepting the inevitable, as if to say, "It had to be done. We had to do this play." But I can see that it has cost him to recreate the story. Later that week I ask him about it and he says that, yes, it can give him a headache, and can give him bad dreams, but he wants to do it. He assures me and the others that he wants to do it.

Bunron chooses another National Theatre actor, his friend Kry Onn, to play his friend in the piece he has written. Twenty-seven days later, they perform the piece, which is called, "Because of Hunger", at a press conference for Khmer journalists to introduce the play, which will be performed at the French Cultural Center. The press immediately asks, with a camera pointed at me: "Why the Khmer Rouge? Is this about the tribunal?" "It's a play," I say. "Theater." The actors say the same.

After Bunron and Kry Onn perform the piece for the people at the press conference and a few other pieces are performed, we ask for questions. One of the journalists in the audience says, "The Khmer Rouge did not have swords, they had bayonets." The journalist remembers that in his case as a survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime, a different kind of weapon was used. In our circle later Bunron asks, puzzled, "Why did he correct my memory?" Bunron knows what he remembers. "He probably wants to share his own story," I say apologetically. Bunron is an artist, a survivor of a régime that tried to kill all artists, and now can tell his story, as an actor. The journalist does not seem to have had that same opportunity.

After the project is completed and I have the chance to study Bunron's face, I see that being an actor and telling his story has helped make him feel that his experiences are meaningful and that by using his skills as an artist he can make a difference. He is also a generous person, as are all the actors in the group, and he does the work as much for them and for me, as for himself. Surprisingly for the second piece he writes, Bunron reveals that he is also a talented comic.

Lamentation of a Widow

When she does her piece, it is almost as if I am watching a silent film, except that Prak Vanny whispers to herself. Later when we stage what she has written, she moves the actors around to fit her memory; she directs them. She takes Chhouep Tang, the young man she has chosen to play her husband, by the shoulders and physically moves him to the place on stage where she wants him to be. What she does is recreate her piece-in rehearsals, in run-throughs-each and every time with the same amount of dignity. It is a short piece, maybe two minutes, but it is as if by repeating it, she gives it the impact it so clearly deserves for her: the minutes leading up to the last time she saw her husband. She was wrapping rice in banana leaves, there was a knock on the door, it was a Khmer Rouge officer. She is the oldest in the group, and it is eerie to see handsome Chhouep Tang play her husband, young as he would have been at the time. Fitting that she chose him. I learn that she was once a playwright herself, as well as an actress.

One actor is skeptical when she has finished showing us her piece. He asks, "How do we know what happened to your husband?" I am surprised by his question because every movement she makes from the moment she starts to wrap the rice in the banana leaves to the moment she leaves for work, miming putting the hoe over her shoulder, makes it clear what happened to her husband. And there was never any doubt, for anyone who ever watched Prak Vanny's piece. And yet there is doubt for the actors that the simplicity of what they originally do will not be enough.

Photographs

Rithy Panh, the French-Khmer filmmaker, has chosen Than Nandoeun (Doeun), one of the National Theatre actors, to direct my short play, "Photographs From S-21", and has cast the actress Sok Ly as the Young Woman and Roeun Narith as the Young Man. Narith was the lead in one of Rithy's recent films. "Photographs From S-21" will be done in tandem with the group of actor-written pieces "Night Please Go Faster", titled after Monika Yin's piece, about the flooding of her squatter hut, and a prayer she makes to her missing parents.

At Tuol Sleng, in humid sunshine, the Khmer photographer Remissa Mak takes photos of both actors Sok Ly and Roeun Narith. He recreates the poses of the two victims in my play. Doeun, the director, wants to use Remissa's blown-up photos as the set design, so that the souls of the photos will walk out of their frames embodied by Ly and Narith. I offer my hand as the child's hand reaching up to the Young Woman in the photograph, and I lay on the ground as Remissa tells me how exactly to clutch my fist like a child on the bottom of Sok Ly's black shirt.

There is almost no barrier for me when I listen to the play in Khmer and, during rehearsals, I give my notes to the director, Doeun, through my interpreter Dom. To me the rhythm seems slow and the tone sometimes one note. My comments don't seem to have much effect.

Doeun has created impressionistic light and sound for my play which surprise and intrigue me. In retrospect they create a kind of theater which is more poetic and non-linear than what I'm used to in the U.S. Doeun, an actor himself, does the sound for the play by breathing into a microphone from the booth in the back of the theater. During the performances, by the end of the play, the theater is totally silent but for sniffing. And when the lights come up no one moves from their seat. Every night before their performance, the actors Narith and Ly burn incense and pray to the two nameless victims in the photos they are playing.

Classes at RUFA

When I arrive to teach my first of two master-classes at the Royal University of Fine Arts, the door to the room is padlocked shut and there is no one present. Later, students trickle in-one using a feather duster to clean off the dusty chairs. I do a mini-version of what the National Theatre actors and I are doing. These students at the Royal University of Fine Arts are in their late teens and early twenties: born after Pol Pot. They are classical Khmer dancers, folk dancers or specializing in traditional theater forms such as Yiké, Bassac or Shadow Puppetry. In a circle I give them the same assignment as I did on the first day with the other group and what I get is a vast outpouring of stories, discussion and written pieces acted out nearly instantly in front of my eyes. Their stories are about a teacher whose salary is too low and whose wife betrays him with a richer man; the negativity of Cambodia's youth shunning its culture; a young girl who

works in a factory and gets pregnant; the death penalty; acid attacks; a strike by workers who are getting paid too little; a conflicted "Power Man" in the government; a neighbor who tries to intervene in domestic violence; trafficking.

A young man, a Yiké actor, reads his play with two other actresses, crying when he reads his part, which is the main role, and there is so much conviction in him and in his play that I know he is a playwright. When I tell him this he considers it with a serious expression. Sometimes when a student performs or reads his or her play the classroom bursts into an intense discussion which goes by too fast for me to understand completely, with my interpreter. And my interpreter is soon involved in the discussion and stops translating. I love to watch the gesturing of the students, the care on their faces. In this room plays are multiplying and multiplying in front of my eyes. A fertile, wild ground for new modern Khmer theater.