First Person

Seeing Eyes

How contemporary plays open eyes and hearts to the legacy of Cambodia's killing fields

By Catherine Filloux

During their date scene in *Eyes of the Heart*, actors Eunice Wong and Alexis Camins kiss each other a bit more enthusiastically than I'd imagined my characters would, but the scene is humorous and endearing. Still, Khul Tithchenda, the young Cambodian student (nicknamed "Chenda") who is acting as a consultant to the production of my play, at New York City's National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO), has a stern expression on her face. I can tell something is wrong. We hang out in the hall during a break from rehearsal. After some nervous laughter, she offers me a dose of razor-sharp honesty. In Cambodia (or Khmer), Chenda tells me, kissing on stage is bad—and premarital sex is a sure way for a female character to be considered "damaged goods." Chenda is, in many ways, "the perfect Khmer woman," and this places us on opposite sides of the bridge between East and West.

Nonetheless, the problems involving the sexuality of my young Cambodian-American character, Serey, pale in comparison to the trauma experienced by the play's other female protagonist, Thida San. *Eyes of the Heart* is about Cambodian refugee women like Thida who suffer from documented psychosomatic blindness, a direct result of witnessing the genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime. So while Chenda considers Serey's heroism nebulous, Chenda and I do fully agree that Thida is the play's true heroine, because Thida, Chenda tells me, remains loyal to her family after the wartime atrocities and because she holds on to her culture even in the ghetto of Long Beach, Calif.

I first met Chenda when I taught a playwriting workshop at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in late 2003. Chenda is a 24-year-old director of *lakhaoun niyeay* (roughly translated, "spoken-word theatre"), a dialogue-driven style more contemporary than the traditional Cambodian forms of *khaol, yike* and *bassac*, which use masks, stylized gestures and song. Chenda has traveled to the U.S. for a six-week apprenticeship on NAATCO's production of *Eyes of the Heart*. When she returns to Cambodia, she will direct the same play in Khmer for her final project at RUFA in 2005.

According to the country's minister of women's affairs, Mu Sochua, men are viewed in Cambodian culture as "gems," while women are "cotton"—if cotton falls in the mud, it is permanently soiled, while a gem is barely sullied. Similarly, Chenda thinks that Serey's reputation has been ruined by the play's suggestion of her offstage sexual experimentation and her self-determined idea of "checking it out" (and losing her virginity) with Savath, the man her father wants her to marry. In the play, Thida expresses a strong belief in—even a protectiveness toward—her niece Serey; in a way, Thida re-imagines her own daughter Oun in Serey, and her feelings for the young woman suggest that she is learning to forgive herself for letting her own daughter die in the brutal hands of the Khmer Rouge. But Chenda views it differently: In her eyes, Thida comes across as wholly a critic of Serey, because her neice is "easy" and "a girl who will sleep with anyone" in the eyes of Cambodia's patriarchal society.

During rehearsals, Chenda assists the director Kay Matschullat and the assistant stage manager Suzie Cho, providing the NAATCO actors meticulous details for the Khmer props used for the Buddhist temple and the engagement party for Serey and Svath, the Cambodian-American couple, who kissed so visibly on their date. In addition to being a theatre director, Chenda teaches young people in her own country—her mother runs Cambodia Morality Youth Association, a group that instructs poor youth about Cambodian codes of conduct, culture and dance, after the ravages of the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Chenda patiently demonstrates the proper Buddhist way of bowing, sitting, serving food and praying. She shows NAATCO's artistic/producing director Mia Katigbak, who portrays Thida, how Cambodian women fluidly sink to a sitting position at a temple, with her legs tucked neatly to her side, and reassures Mia that if her legs fall asleep it is okay to switch them to the other side. Chenda displays for the actress Virginia Wing how to place a dish of food gently on a blind person's lap. Chenda also teaches the entire cast to bow correctly for specific events: When bowing to an elder, a young person like Serey must keep her hands in the prayer position, fingertips at the level of the lips; when she bows to her Aunt Thida, fingertips are at the nose; and at the temple, one prays to the gods or monks with fingertips to the hairline. Katigbak and Nadia Bowers, the actress playing an American eye doctor, incorporate the three bows of prayer taught by Chenda into several later moments, including a ghost visitation scene.

I can never forget the time and energy Chenda spends teaching the cast how to help put a silk skirt (*sampot*) on Bowers's Dr. Simpson. Chenda and I go back and forth figuring out the correct term. A skirt made of cotton and worn at home (a *sarong*) is entirely different from the more elegant *sampot*, and there are many other terms for silk skirts, depending on the print of the fabric. The Thai-American costume designer, Suttirat Larlarb, chooses her fabrics

carefully, which in turn is reflected in Chenda's pleasure and acceptance.

James Saito, the actor playing Thida's brother Kim, asks Chenda to show him the Khmer way to massage the shoulders of his ailing sister. Despite Chenda's reticence towards public displays of affection, she is not opposed to a playful, subtle flirtation with James, who is always solicitous and charming.

After rehearsals one night, my husband and I are invited to dinner at the apartment of the Cambodian-American couple where Chenda is staying in New York City. Chenda has brought with her an entire suitcase of noodles, dried fish and shrimp—she came equipped to save her per-diem. During the delicious and varied meal, the phone rings. A Cambodian man in Minnesota saw Chenda on Cambodian TV, where she serves as a spokeswoman for her mother's youth association, and he has been trying to track her down to meet her in person. According to Chenda, her mother has given the man her New York phone number, because it is her mother who will decide whom Chenda will marry one day. I am left somewhat alarmed at the thought that a man may be trying to meet Chenda to marry her during her NAATCO apprenticeship, but I never hear anything more about it.

By the end of her U.S. visit, Chenda has begun to speak English more fluently. She giggles with delight when she says "slow dancing," the code word for sex used by Chhem, the traditional grandmother in *Eyes of the Heart*. During the week that Chenda and I debate Serey's sexuality, I rewrite the scene in which Serey's father discovers she slept with Savath, deepening the price that the girl must pay for her choices. At first I go a little too far in the opposite direction, and my actors urge me to come back towards what was before; the final rewrite is a balancing act between cultures. Chenda remarks she may have to take the kissing out of the date scene in the Cambodian version of the play at RUFA.

NAATCO usually produces classical works and adaptations cast with Asian-American actors, and *Eyes of the Heart* is its first original work. Through Katigbak's grassroots efforts, her company has opened doors to a new community of Asians who have much to teach us. In Cambodia and in the U.S.—but for vastly different reasons—the younger generation knows little to nothing about the Cambodian genocide of 1975–1979, in which some 1.7 million people (21 percent of the country's population) lost their lives. After seeing *Eyes of the Heart*, the Cambodian ambassador to the United Nations, Sichan Siv, returned with 12 ambassadors and diplomats from around the world to share their own stories about Cambodia.

The mystery of Thida's blindness in the play provides a point of entry for American audiences, who expect a medical answer but find a human one instead. Meanwhile, Cambodians who have seen the many plays I have written about their country frequently apply them to their own lives, as they try to come to grips with one of the worst human tragedies of the past century.

Unfortunately, there has been no national or international criminal tribunal for the prosecution of those accused of genocide in Cambodia, despite the sincere efforts and personal crusades to bring the perpetrators of "the killing fields" to justice. The misdeeds of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot are not taught in the schools. Ieng Sary, Pol Pot's right-hand man, continues to live a wealthy life in Phnom Penh, and he still works for the current government. In my play *Silence of God*, a poet-survivor, Heng Chhay, kills himself when he finds out his brother is friends with Ieng Sary. Yet years after my play was produced at West Virginia's Contemporary American Theater Festival, I found myself recently driving by Ieng Sary's lovely villa on my way to teach at RUFA. If this is psychic torture for me, one can imagine what it is for Cambodian people who lost entire families.

When I first met Chenda in 2003, the 30 students in my RUFA playwriting workshop, ranging in age from 18 to 50 (some were professional theatre artists going back to school to get degrees) admitted that in the current political climate they were afraid to write. A few months earlier, a Cambodian pop singer, Touch Prey Nich, and the radio journalist who played her songs, Chour Chetharith, had been shot; activists from the Democracy Party had also been assassinated. Nonetheless, during my workshop, I was surprised to discover that two young Cambodian woman dancers who had never written plays dared to write about a female thief who hides stolen car parts in a *wat* (Buddhist temple) and a wealthy, gun-wielding man who is more concerned about the dent in his car than the elderly motor-driver he runs over.

The legacy of the Khmer Rouge years is an absence of the rule of law. There is, however, a new breed of young artists like Chenda, who have dedicated their lives to teaching younger generations about their culture—and about a past in which the Khmer Rouge targeted artists and succeeded in killing most of them. RUFA, where Chenda is getting her directing degree, dates back to the '60s, but it was virtually destroyed during the genocide, and there is now very little money to rebuild the school's infrastructure. (The preservation of Cambodia's traditional dance forms has been the priority for funding, and so it is difficult for graduating students to find support for *lakhaoun niyeay*.) Most of the teachers at RUFA are men who are sharply critical of change; when I once suggested a student/actress take over my class, the fact that she was a woman seemed prohibitive.

Cambodians tend to think there's lavish funding for theatre in America, but after her first trip away from home Chenda sees that funding for the arts is hard to come by in both our countries. Chenda says that before coming to the

U.S. she had never seen a poetically abstract set such as the one Mimi Lien designed for *Eyes of the Heart*; the swift scene changes are a convention Chenda wants to bring to the Cambodian production. Actors playing multiple roles are not a convention Chenda knows either—she wonders if it will confuse Cambodian audiences. Meanwhile, she convinces our friend Chath pier-Sath, a Cambodian visual artist, poet and survivor, to translate the first act of *Eyes of the Heart* during the last days of rehearsals, so we only have to hire a translator for the second act; this way, she tells me confidently, we can use the rest of the money for production. Graduating students at RUFA raise their own funds for final projects and sometimes mount them again for a commercial run. Chenda hopes to do this with my play. Seeing it on the RUFA stage will be a true vision of East meeting West—and of facing our own pasts.

On opening night of NAATCO's *Eyes of the Heart*, Cambodian-American peace activist/survivor Arn Chorn-Pond is seen crying in the lobby; he tells us that his own mother went blind after the Khmer Rouge. Arn now divides his time making movies in Cambodia, searching out master musicians and traveling the world talking about his youth as a child soldier under the Khmer Rouge. An American, Charley Todd of Cambodian Living Arts, an organization Arn founded to preserve the work of Cambodia's master musicians, tells me that a female master-singer of traditional funeral music (*smote*) suffers from the same blindness as Thida, after seeing her husband killed at their village *wat*. Every night of the run in New York City, when Mia's blind Thida San says the last line of the play—"She said *no* to them"—there is a sense of the possible victory of art over unspeakable violence. Both Chenda and I want to create plays that honor culture—that say "never again."

Playwright Catherine Filloux was a Fulbright senior specialist in playwriting in Cambodia in 2003. She is the author of Silence of God, The Beauty Inside, The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown, Mary and Myra, *among others. Her next project, an opera with Cambodian composer Him Sophy, will be produced by Cambodian Living Arts.*