

Catherine Filloux

by Caridad Svich

Catherine Filloux's plays include *The Beauty Inside*, *Silence of God*, *Mary and Myra*, *Eyes of the Heart*, and *Three Continents*. She has received awards from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, O'Neill, Rockefeller MAP Fund, and Asian Cultural Council and a Fulbright for her work in Cambodia. Her libretto for the opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown* (music by Jason Kao Hwang) premiered at the reopening of the Asia Society in 2001. New World Records will release the CD. Catherine's short play *Photographs From S-21*, about genocide, has toured the world. Her plays are published by Smith & Kraus and Playscripts, Inc. She has an M.F.A. from New York Univ.'s Tisch School and is a member of New Dramatists. This interview was conducted online November 2002 as Filloux was about to begin her Thurber House fellowship-residency at Ohio State Univ.

CARIDAD SVICH: You have done work in oral history with the Cambodian Women's Group and research as well,



Above: Catherine Filloux.

and this work has led to plays such as *Silence of God* and *Eyes of the Heart*. How do you negotiate fact and fiction? Are you ever caught between staying true to the facts of people's lives and the transformation that happens in the imagination, which changes facts into something else?

CATHERINE FILLOUX: My work with "oral history" is one of the factors that led me to feel as a witness to injustice. I saw and heard stories that changed me and cumulatively led to the desire to "never forget." Then after many years of this kind of work, more recently, I had the experience of the glass filling up and overflowing, and my latest play, *The Beauty Inside* is about a certain kind of revolution. The "fact" of the plays is the emotion of what I saw and heard, the "fiction" is my imagination and how I craft the work. With my new play, *The Beauty Inside*, the story was inspired by a newspaper article, but I realized I could never know the girl in question, because her whereabouts are being kept secret. I decided to imagine her story, and I wrote the play to honor her, but the play is actually about motherhood, in many ways – my own motherhood.

Silence of God was a case where, after ten years, I had the luxury of being able to talk to a wide range of people about Pol Pot and the 1998 U.S. capture plan. Going so deeply into a subject that is as complex as *Silence of God* is the ultimate project for me. A commission from Contemporary American Theater Festival made it a reality, and then they produced the play. The play has information

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in it that warrants one of the Khmer Rouge being arrested before he dies, and I've been stunned by how few people seem to care about this. I recently got into a fight with a friend who said our U.S. domestic problems take precedence. I imagined a scene where my main character met Brother Number 3 and made it part of the play.

CS: When did you find your voice as a writer? Do you remember the moment? Was it through a specific play or other text?

CF: One day I realized I would have to write *Three Continents*, which is my family's story, and I would have to be honest.

CS: Your father came to the U.S. from France by catamaran and built the first fiberglass sailboat in this country, which was financed by a French perfume company. “Perfume boats” and your mother's homeland, North Africa, are the subject of *Three Continents*.

CF: Yes, I might have found my voice, but it almost killed me. It was very hard to write that play, but I came through the other side, and that's why maybe I'm a better playwright. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it. The play is as idiosyncratic as I am, and through it I discovered language, the language of a girl who's French and American and an outsider. Language saved me as a little girl. It totally saved me. I think I really loved English. It was my own language, separated from my parents, the language I would use to live in the new country that we ended up. It was very revolutionary that language, insofar as it was mine.

CS: As someone born of immigrant parents, have you ever felt disaffected from U.S. culture? How does this affect your writing?

CF: Yes, it is at the core of everything I do, am, and write. To not belong in America, to not belong in France, to not belong in Algeria, North Africa, would of course fuel a lifetime of searching and drive me constantly and subliminally toward finding out what culture I do belong to. This feeling of being a “citizen of the world” comes completely from my parents. It's in my bones and second nature; I've had a hard time explaining it to people. I've never seen myself as anything but a world participant, and

sometimes I think Americans think I'm making some kind of judgment, when that's just how I was born. Sometimes it makes me sad how hard that has been to communicate to people. I think the minute you have to translate in your mind from one language to another, you see that meaning and expression is a creative and non-exact act. I think the way my “foreign” family behaved in America was theater in itself, and when I would witness my French relatives in their surroundings, that was certainly theater, too. My grandfather on my mother's side was a prankster who liked to play tricks, including dressing up in costumes and putting mini-firecrackers in things, and my paternal grandfather fought in both world wars and described to me trench warfare.

CS: Would you speak a bit to your work in the opera world with *The Floating Box* and the world of film and television? These are different worlds, disparate even, yet both have the demands of higher budgets and even more hurdles to jump to get work through and across.

CF: My work on *The Floating Box* was blessed with a visionary collaborator, the composer Jason Kao Hwang. Our process was very organic, and in part, we ended up telling our own personal, family stories, and we spent a lot of time getting to know each other's creative processes. I remember listening to an audiotope of some oral histories he gave me, and they floored me. His own history was unbelievable, and this was a gift. The director Jean Randich was also a key part of the collaboration. An opera demands more players, and the quality of the players determines how hard the hurdles will be. It was very interesting that, once we got into the rehearsal process for *The Floating Box*, no words could be changed – actually, in some instances, literally not one word. That was strange, after being a playwright where cutting entire scenes is so easy. I really was surprised by that. I did so many drafts of the libretto before the music came.

I developed my play *Eyes of the Heart* for Lifetime TV. I've never worked so hard in my life, in terms of listening to large groups of people and generating drafts. This was the kind of work where you gain weight, because you actually

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don’t get out of your chair – ever. One day, I found myself at the bookstore, lurking in the aisles, reading everything I could find on “sex addiction,” because it had been suggested by one participant that a main character, an eye doctor, be a sex addict. It was an interesting research project, and when I arrived in LAX, I was paged, because I was in big trouble for an idea I myself thought was insane. I made a pact with myself that I would do anything to get my story made for TV, and I still hold true to the pact.

CS: You have developed a strong working relationship with Contemporary American Theater. How has this relationship affected your writing, your possibilities as a writer, and your relationship to that specific audience in West Virginia?

CF: CATF has provided me with a home, and that relationship is one of the most important elements of my playwriting. I wrote my latest play with CATF in mind. They have allowed me to write the stories I want to tell, and the audiences in West Virginia have opened themselves to new and risky subject matter, because they are presented with four new plays every season – and this has been going on for more than a decade. CATF is a good prototype of how new work should work!

CS: The short form is one that you seem to be attracted to as a playwright. What is it about the form that appeals to you to tell a story? Do the short plays ever lead to full-lengths?

CF: Well, I must admit I’ve been asked to write all those short plays, and I knew they’d be produced immediately. That’s the initial attraction. Yes, *The Beauty Inside* led to my new full-length, and *Photographs from S-21* has been done all over the world. The form is perhaps to theater what the short story is to fiction. It’s challenging and fun.

CS: What is it like for you to work abroad and stage your work there, as opposed to the U.S.? Do audiences respond differently to your work or do you?

CF: It was interesting to stage the work in Cambodia, because that is a country – due to its history of war – where

there is not much modern theater to speak of. It of course makes one realize the power of art: my play stood outside of a volatile political situation and allowed people to feel. When interviewed by the press, it was very comforting to say, “We’re just doing a play, this is not a political statement.” So, the power of theater there was palpable in ways it isn’t here. In England, I had a play done in tandem with a play from Sarajevo. To put two different “genocides” side by side in a third country, in this case England, created a dialogue that I could never have experienced in the U.S. Europe is closer to Sarajevo, but Cambodia seemed even further away in England than in America. It’s interesting how emotion is international. I respond differently to my work abroad, because I feel it needs to be even deeper there, so it’s a good lesson.

CS: What do you learn from traveling, and what is the impact on your writing life?

CF: I’m obsessive, so as soon as I set up my computer and figure out the voltage problems – very often anxiety provoking – I’m set to go. I need to know I can write. Then, I can look out the window and start to explore. I think traveling can’t help but open up the horizons of one’s writing. One thinks further, in a way, and then when you get home, you have new perspective. Also, nostalgia is part of traveling, and nostalgia is at the core of an immigrant’s soul, so, in my heart. One of the reasons I travel is because as a playwright I’m a freelancer and I have needed to travel to get paid. I also enjoy the element of chance. I don’t know where I’m going. I learned a lot from my parents about freedom, and I think their sense of travel is linked to freedom. [DG]

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