

Here and There

BY CATHERINE FILLOUX

During the twenty-hour flight from New York to Cambodia, I try to prepare to be as refreshed and focused as possible when I arrive at Sochua's house in Phnom Penh. She is campaigning for parliament and is leaving for the U.S. on a fundraising trip hours after I get there. It's November 2006 and she has two more years until the election. She used to be Minister of Women's Affairs and was co-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 for her work involving human trafficking. When you are interviewing the perfect woman you want to be at your best. I am speaking to her for a theater piece called *Seven*, in which direct testimony of seven women leaders from around the world is being gathered and edited by seven American women playwrights. Playwright Carol K. Mack originated the project to benefit Vital Voices Global Partnership that supports emerging women leaders in 85 countries. This is the first time I have ever worked on a piece that is direct testimony, and my husband has helped me find a digital tape recorder at Circuit City.

Sochua Mu's home is simple and tranquil. I can hear children playing outside in the early evening air and a soothing cacophony of insects. I have known Sochua since 2001 and this is my third trip to Cambodia for my plays. One of the joys of my playwriting has been to befriend Sochua and other Cambodian (Khmer) women. Sochua speaks softly and candidly at a dining room table, where we

share some fruit and drink tea. She has worked with victims of human trafficking and she tells me about a Cambodian ritual, "Calling the Souls." When a woman or girl has been trafficked, she feels her soul has been taken away. Sochua talks about performing the ritual in hope of getting back the soul (*pralung*). She tells me she doesn't necessarily believe in these rituals, though she knows they are an important part of her culture. For her, the ritual translates into the idea of justice: to get jail sentences for the traffickers and brothel owners.

Sochua's job is tough, risky and awe-inspiring. In her home I feel settled and privileged to be listening to her. We laugh easily together. She welcomes me. She confides in me. The atmosphere couldn't be more different from the violence of human trafficking and genocide. I know that this oasis I see before me must come and go. For myself, I see it like a sandbar. Sometimes you can stand on it and sometimes you're underwater. These sandbars are

beautiful and they also disappear. Through my playwriting work regarding genocide and human rights, I share with Sochua the faith that change is possible, and we can make it happen. I know the sandbars can slowly ease their way back, so you can ultimately find your ground again.

I'm actually in Cambodia for two weeks, having written the libretto for *Where Elephants Weep*, an opera that is composed by Cambodian composer Sophy Him and will receive its first preview in Lowell, Massachusetts, in April 2007. I was lucky to get



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Arts, since 2002. I've come to know how Sophy feels about something by simply looking at his face! Our piece is a cross-cultural hybrid, a story about the clash of modernity and tradition. Listening to each other has been a daily process, and for me, the process of listening has become about keeping memory alive. Eighty to ninety percent of artists in Cambodia were killed during the Pol Pot regime. Now Ieng Sithol, a famous Khmer actor-singer who also survived Pol Pot, will perform Sophy's music in Lowell.

As a playwright it is a great luxury to explore one subject so deeply. And, of course, it never really ends up being one subject. I've always been an "outsider" in America. My parents are immigrants, and English was not my first language. The first time I returned from Cambodia in 2001, after being away three months, I stared at New York City like a total outsider, saying to myself, "This can't be possible." Such an economic gap is not humanly explicable. I also did think to myself ominously: "Something is going to happen." And on my later trips, when I'd first arrive in Cambodia, I'd feel anger brewing about Pol Pot. As an outsider I'd think, how could this man destroy a country? How are the killers still free? A desire to take a stand – no matter what – inspired my newest play, *Killing the Boss*. What can a playwright truly do to work for justice? How far do you put yourself out there? What do you do with the anger and the pain? *Killing the Boss* has been a long, hard road toward forgiveness, and toward my belief in theater as an extremely precious art form. My cherished and long-term collaborators in America helped me with the journey. For the first time in my life, returning to New York after this last trip, I found myself feeling neither like an outsider nor an insider. I was, finally – here – and there. I could hold the two places inside me at the same time. And the sandbars come and go depending on the world's unequal tides. ♦

the chance to interview Sochua on this trip. There is a vibrant Cambodian community in Lowell, and after it is performed there it will be done in Cambodia. Sophy has invented two traditional Khmer instruments with music director Scot Stafford, to better accommodate his score, which requires an orchestra of traditional Khmer instruments, a Cambodian rock-and-roll band and a string quartet. A survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime, Sophy trained for 13 years in Moscow. Fluent in Khmer, French, Vietnamese, Russian and English, he is a teacher, musician and composer whose flexibility and vision is a testament to Cambodia and its survival. We have been working on this opera project with producers Arn Chorn-Pond and John Burt, the founders of Cambodian Living