

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM S-21

A SHORT DRAMA BY
CATHERINE FILLOUX

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To Davin K. Hun

Cast of Characters

YOUNG WOMAN: A young Cambodian woman who wears black pajamas and an ID tag

YOUNG MAN: A young Cambodian man with the same pajamas and tag

Place

A modern museum

Time

August, 1997

Program Note

A show entitled “Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979” was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the summer of 1997.

Acknowledgements

Photographs from S-21 was first produced in HB Playwrights Short Play Festival 1998, “The Museum Plays” (William Carden, Artistic Director), at HB Playwrights Theatre in New York City (opening night June 10, 1998), with the following cast and staff:

YOUNG WOMAN..... Dawn Akemi Saito
YOUNG MAN..... Andrew Pang

Directors Eva Saks and William Carden
Scenic Design Andy Warfel
Lighting Design..... Chris Dallos
Costume Design Amela Baksic
Sound Design..... Robert Auld
Stage Manager Kimberly I. Kefgen

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM S-21

by Catherine Filloux

(A young woman and a young man pose, frozen, in the huge life-size frames of their black and white photos, facing each other. They both wear black pajamas and ID tags. The young woman's ID is a long number, with some Cambodian handwriting and a date. The young man's is simply a tag with the number three. They both stare at the camera the moment after blindfolds were taken from their eyes. There is a light shining at the bottom of the woman's frame.)

(The woman lets out a soft wail.)

YOUNG WOMAN. I can't go on.

YOUNG MAN. ...What did you say?

YOUNG WOMAN. I don't know where I am.

YOUNG MAN. Me neither...

YOUNG WOMAN. Who are you? All day long I listen to voices. I understand nothing, but I understand you.

YOUNG MAN. I am across from you. On the wall. Look, can you see me?

YOUNG WOMAN. No, my eyes are weak. They blindfolded me for a long time. Then suddenly they took off the blindfold and took my photo.

YOUNG MAN. Yes, the same with me. But I can see you.

YOUNG WOMAN. Who are you?

YOUNG MAN. A photograph, on the wall, like you.

YOUNG WOMAN. It is unbearable. During the day the people pass. They stare into my eyes. At night, there is no air. Like the inside of a cushion.

(A beat.)

YOUNG MAN. Would you like to move from where you are and meet me at the center of the room? There is a bench. Then you could see *me*.

YOUNG WOMAN. I can't move.

YOUNG MAN. Try and I will try.

YOUNG WOMAN. I don't know who you are.

YOUNG MAN. I speak your language.

YOUNG WOMAN. They spoke my language.

YOUNG MAN. Who?

YOUNG WOMAN. The Khmer Rouge.

YOUNG MAN. I'm not Khmer Rouge.

(He breaks out of the photo to show her.)

YOUNG MAN. Look, no red scarf. That's why I'm here. I ran away.

(A beat.)

YOUNG MAN. Would you like me to describe you? So that you know I can see you.

YOUNG WOMAN. No... I am ashamed.

YOUNG MAN. Why?

YOUNG WOMAN. My black pajamas.

YOUNG MAN. I wear the same.

YOUNG WOMAN. The number they pinned on me.

YOUNG MAN. I am Number Three.

YOUNG WOMAN. My number is much longer.

YOUNG MAN. Yes. There is also a date on your identification... It says, "Seventeen, Five, Seventy-eight."

YOUNG WOMAN. You must have very good eyesight.

YOUNG MAN. Thank you. I have been staring at you for a long time. You are always there, except when the crowds become big and block you, or the guard turns off the light... I see so many things in you, now... Fear, determination, beauty, surprise... Your

eyes are like water in a lake that reflects the passing seasons... I have begun to see you like that...

YOUNG WOMAN. The date on my identification is May 17, 1978.

(He moves towards her.)

YOUNG MAN. There is something strange at the bottom of your picture. It is blurred... I cannot make it out...

YOUNG WOMAN. No.

YOUNG MAN. ...I see it. Something just inside the frame, moving skyward...

YOUNG WOMAN. No, there is nothing. *(A beat.)* My husband *cried* when they killed his mother.

YOUNG MAN. They killed you if you cried.

YOUNG WOMAN. I know. In the labor camp. They cracked her skull with a shovel because she was too slow working. We could not even bury her. So now she is *kmauit* – a restless ghost...

(The YOUNG MAN moves to the bench.)

YOUNG MAN. I always envy the visitors who sit here. Sometimes they sit in groups. Families. They read the books that are here. They write in a book too.

YOUNG WOMAN. Sometimes the people come like a parade. They walk in and out. Like a stream, staring into my eyes. Their eyes are all different colors. Blue. Green. Yellow. Like lights.

YOUNG MAN. It's nice to find someone who speaks the same language.

(He stretches out on the bench.)

YOUNG MAN. Are you sure you don't want to stretch your legs...? You know we aren't the only ones on the wall. There are twenty-two of us. Cambodians. Or at least that's what I think I see. All being posed for photos at "S-21."

YOUNG WOMAN. S-21 used to have another name... "Tuol Sleng."

(He looks through the guest book on the table and reads.)

YOUNG MAN. Someone's written something here in our language! Listen. "*Do not forget. Signed, Sovindara Hun. New York City.*" (A beat.) We're in America...

(The woman moves from her photograph very stiffly.)

YOUNG MAN. Hey, you did it... ! Please, come sit down. This is comfortable.

YOUNG WOMAN. No, let me stand for a moment. I'm dizzy.

YOUNG MAN. You want me to coin you?

YOUNG WOMAN. No, no, no.

YOUNG MAN. I have a coin!

(He rolls up the cuff of his pajama pants and feels in the lining.)

YOUNG MAN. I sewed this little pocket, when I returned from the labor camp to my grandmother's. I'd heard she was dying and they gave me permission to go see her. I asked her for a needle and thread and I made a secret pocket. I hid some gold she gave me and some coins. My lighter. A lot of good it did me.

(He takes out the coin.)

YOUNG MAN. Come on, sit down. Here, give me your arm. I'm sorry, I don't have any oil...

(She sits and he starts to rub her arm forcefully with the coin.)

YOUNG MAN. How does it feel?

YOUNG WOMAN. *(In awe:)* I do not believe it.

YOUNG MAN. What do you mean?

YOUNG WOMAN. I am in a dream.

YOUNG MAN. No, you're in America...

YOUNG WOMAN. America?

YOUNG MAN. You know, rich people, lots of cars. Willie Nelson.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, yes... Is that why they sent you to S-21? Because they found the gold?

YOUNG MAN. No, they never got the gold!

(He quickly takes a piece of gold out of the secret pocket and shows her, delighted.)

YOUNG MAN. Look, it's right here. I tricked them!

(He puts it back in his pocket.)

YOUNG MAN. Here give me your other arm.

(He touches one of her hands, which is always clenched in a fist. She pulls away.)

YOUNG MAN. You're shaking.

YOUNG WOMAN. I'm always cold. Shaking with fright.

YOUNG MAN. They're not here.

(She looks at her uniform and ID tag.)

YOUNG WOMAN. They can't be far away...

(He puts his arm around her.)

YOUNG MAN. Here, let me warm you, darling.

YOUNG WOMAN. Why do you call me that?

YOUNG MAN. I called my sister that... We're dead, so you don't have to be scared... I mean, that is the truth... I wish we had something to eat... What kind of food do you wish for, if you could have anything?

YOUNG WOMAN. But we are *here*, Number Three.

YOUNG MAN. Don't call me that. I have a name.

YOUNG WOMAN. Who knows it now?

YOUNG MAN. You.

(He puts his palms together and bows.)

YOUNG MAN. "Vuthy."

(She puts her palm and fist together, bowing back.)

YOUNG WOMAN. Tuol Sleng was a school, Vuthy. As a girl I went there to learn to read and write. That's where they took me on May 17, 1978. I walked in and remembered forming my letters so carefully, reading the words... *They* killed you if you could read and write...

YOUNG MAN. I know. *(He points to the frame.)* It's strange to be here now.

YOUNG WOMAN. America.

YOUNG MAN. I don't know if we're really here.

YOUNG WOMAN. We feel real.

(He resumes his position in the frame.)

YOUNG MAN. Maybe it's because we're in the photographs. And people pass by. And every time their eyes touch ours we're back there again.

YOUNG WOMAN. They look at me so strange. Like they are asking me a question.

YOUNG MAN. Yes.

YOUNG WOMAN. I can never turn away.

YOUNG MAN. Caught.

YOUNG WOMAN. Who are they, who look?

YOUNG MAN. Ghosts, maybe... Ghosts of the Khmer Rouge.

YOUNG WOMAN. But they do not look the same.

YOUNG MAN. Why else would they come back again and again to see us? To check on us?

YOUNG WOMAN. Perhaps, you are right, Vuthy. Perhaps they are the enemy, disguised...

(The YOUNG MAN moves away.)

YOUNG WOMAN. *(Urgently:)* Where are you going? Please don't leave me here. You don't know what can happen.

YOUNG MAN. I just want to see what is nearby. The people always seem to be passing through on their way to something called "Picasso."

(He exits and she follows, but stops.)

YOUNG WOMAN. Vuthy, come back... !

(She stands alone. She reenters her frame and starts to take her position.)

YOUNG WOMAN. No, no, no, no. *(She leans down.)* No, no, no...

(The YOUNG MAN hurries back in.)

YOUNG MAN. Darling, what's happened? What's wrong?

(The YOUNG MAN stares into space, totally lost.)

YOUNG MAN. Darling, tell me what happened. Please tell me what happened to you.

(She says nothing at all.)

YOUNG MAN. There, there.

(He takes out the gold.)

YOUNG MAN. Why don't you take this piece of gold?

(She takes it, absently.)

YOUNG MAN. Isn't it beautiful? Hold it to the light.

(She doesn't.)

YOUNG MAN. Well, I'll tell you what I saw, next door. More photographs. Of horses, or flowers, of bananas, just bananas. A boy swimming, a girl dancing, cars – we're in America – dirt, there were photos of dirt, yes. Hills. Houses, square houses with windows, airplanes, old people with lots of wrinkles, a little girl with a short dress, a bicycle, a woman with a hat – smoking a cigarette, a city with many lights. Walls and walls of this, I stopped when I heard your screaming, but it went on and on... I want to show you. It's easy. Just follow me. We'll go past the photographs, find a door... Or perhaps we don't need doors, since we're ghosts...

YOUNG WOMAN. How can I be dead and feel like this?

(The YOUNG MAN has no answer.)

YOUNG WOMAN. What happened to you?

YOUNG MAN. Shocked me with an electric current, starved me, shackled me to the other men, made me sleep in my own...

YOUNG WOMAN. Why did they send you to S-21?

YOUNG MAN. I ran away from the camp. I ate insects and rats, slept underwater... You want to know my real crime? I stayed alive.

YOUNG WOMAN. And after they took off the blindfold?

YOUNG MAN. ...My blood joined the blood of others on the floor...

(A beat.)

YOUNG WOMAN. ...Vuthy?

YOUNG MAN. Yes?

YOUNG WOMAN. You saw right.

(He looks at her, waiting.)

YOUNG WOMAN. There was something at the bottom of my photo... A child's hand...

YOUNG MAN. *(Softly:)* Oh, yes, I looked at it for so long...

YOUNG WOMAN. *(Reliving it:)* They took off the blindfold. My daughter reached up to me. *I did not move. (Softly.)* Did not move... They shot her first... I did not protect her.

(She reaches down to take the hand of the imaginary child.)

YOUNG WOMAN. She reached up her hand...

(He takes her hand.)

YOUNG MAN. Come, we don't want to be ghosts, haunting people at night, making them afraid to fall asleep...

YOUNG WOMAN. I have no one left to haunt. All my family is gone.

YOUNG MAN. We must have some peace, darling. A proper funeral for us.

YOUNG WOMAN. ...I don't deserve peace...

(He takes her hand and they begin to leave. They are captured in a shaft of light during their odyssey outside.)

YOUNG WOMAN. Are we outside?

YOUNG MAN. Yes. The cement feels strange on my feet.

YOUNG WOMAN. Rough. Is it raining?

YOUNG MAN. No, it is a fountain. A proper funeral or we will remain ghosts. Come, stand in the water. *(He leads her into the fountain.)* Close your eyes.

(He caresses her.)

YOUNG MAN. Shhshhh...

(He takes incense from his pocket and lights it with his lighter. He bows before her. She holds out her clenched fist to him.)

YOUNG WOMAN. When I am newly born in my next life, I will still remember the Khmer Rouge.

(She opens her hand and he takes a child's hair ribbon from her palm. Black out.)

(The young woman and man reappear in their frames. A flash and the click of a shutter.)

End of Play

This author is a resident playwright at New Dramatists.

About New Dramatists

Founded in 1949 by a playwright, Michaela O’Harra, New Dramatists is a unique resource for the American theatre. The company is dedicated to the playwright and serves as an artistic home, research and development center, and national writers colony. The company finds and nurtures new talent through a competitive membership selection process and a seven-year playwright development program tailored to the writers’ individual needs.

New Dramatists gives writers the tools that they need—time, generous theatre space, a pool of talented and experienced actors and directors, writing equipment, meeting space, and a gifted peer community—to grow artistically and strengthen their commitment to theatre. The company augments this central focus on artistic growth through programs that advocate and distribute each writer’s work to theatre producers, through grants and fellowships, and with annual playwriting retreats in Lake Placid, New York and Key West, Florida.

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About the Author

Catherine Filloux's play *Silence of God* was commissioned by the Contemporary American Theater Festival and premiered there in summer 2002. Her play *Mary and Myra* was produced in CATF's 2000 season, and appeared in summer 2002 at the Todd Mountain Theater Project. Ms. Filloux was selected for the 2002 Bay Area Playwrights Festival and as the 2003 James Thurber Playwright-in-Residence. Her new play *The Beauty Inside* is part of the 2002-2003 season at Ohio State University's theatre in Columbus. She has been commissioned by Theatreworks/USA for a new play with music, *Arthur's War*. Her libretto for the opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown* (Jason Kao Hwang, composer) premiered at the re-opening of the Asia Society in 2001. New World Records will release the CD, with support from the Aaron Copland Fund. Ms. Filloux's other plays have been produced around the U.S. She has received awards from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, the Rockefeller MAP Fund, and the Asian Cultural Council. Her short play *Photographs From S-21*, about genocide, has toured the world. Her plays are published by Smith and Kraus and Playscripts, Inc. She is a member of New Dramatists.

Playscripts, Inc.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM S-21

by Catherine Filloux

GENRE: Drama

LENGTH: Short play, 15-20 minutes

CAST: 1 female, 1 male

SET: Flexible: a museum with two life-size frames and an abstract fountain.

Two photos come to life in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. They are a young Cambodian woman and man whose photos were taken by the Khmer Rouge right after removing their blindfolds, moments before their execution.

“The play subtly challenges the audience to question its own role as consumers, and curators, of tragedy.”

—Maura Nguyen Donohue, *Flash Review Dispatch*

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