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CAMBODGE. TUOL SLENG OU L'HISTOIRE DU GÉNOCIDE EN CHANTIER

TUOL SLENG, A HISTORY OF THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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MEMORIES AT STAKE

MÉMOIRES EN JEU

Numéro 6 – Mai 2018 – **SOMMAIRE**

Hall of Mirrors

Catherine Filloux,
playwright

Dans ce texte, la dramaturge newyorkaise Catherine Filloux évoque son engagement avec la mémoire des victimes du Génocide cambodgien à partir de sa pièce *Photographs from S.21* (1998), inspirée de l'exposition qui eut lieu en 1997 au Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) de 22 photos anthropométriques de Tuol Sleng. Un engagement qui se poursuivit avec la mise en scène de la pièce à Phnom Penh avec des acteurs cambodgiens et, plus tard, avec deux nouvelles œuvres, *Silence of God* (2002) et *Eyes of the Heart* (2004). L'auteure rappelle la dimension curative du théâtre conçu comme une performance de la mémoire.
Mots clés : théâtre, performance, photos anthropométriques, exposition, MoMA, Phnom Penh.

In the early 1990s I started to research my play *Eyes of the Heart* (2004) about Cambodian refugee women living in the United States, who suffer from psychosomatic blindness after witnessing the Cambodian Genocide between 1975 and 1979. As part of my research, I developed an Oral History Project, "A Circle of Grace," with the Cambodian Woman's Group at St. Rita's Refugee Center in the Bronx, New York. For years, I listened to the stories of Cambodian women refugees there. Stories of how women laced gold chains in the seams of their clothing, since the Khmer Rouge had abolished money; stories of forced marriages in the Khmer Rouge labor camps; rampant starvation; and the merciless killing of family members, one of the Khmer Rouge's methods being hitting people over the head with shovels so as not to waste their bullets. Intensely studying the geopolitics of the region and its relationship to the U.S. and other countries was like peeling back the skin of an onion, skin beneath skin, and this study has continued to this day. The Project awakened me to these women's strength as both survivors of horrible atrocities and as refugees in a strange new land.

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.

It was in this context that I first saw the Tuol Sleng photos at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City in 1997, at the exhibit entitled, "Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields."

At the time, I was involved with the playwriting group at HB Playwrights Foundation in New York City. Each year, the Foundation asked us to write short plays set in a specified place. In 1997, it was The Museum Plays. I thought about the MOMA exhibit and the controversy surrounding it. I feared seeing the exhibit would be traumatizing. By then, I was steeped in the history of the Genocide, feeling as if Pol Pot was in the room with us when the women in the Bronx shared their stories and evoked his name. Nonetheless, I did see the exhibit and my play as the result of that experience. In retrospect, I believe I wrote *Photographs from S.21* for the women who shared their souls with me.

In the play, two photos come to life at 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 at S.21 right after removing their blindfolds, moments before their execution.

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.

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.

The Young Man can't figure out why "the people always seem to be passing through on their way to something called 'Picasso.' " He hopes to make a connection with the Young Woman and, ultimately, discover what happened

to her daughter, whose small hand is reaching up to her in the photograph. He decides to take the Young Woman outside the museum to a fountain, and there, he performs a ceremony with water and incense. The rising incense smoke allows the upward rise of their souls. "When I am newly born in my next life," the Young Woman says, "I will still remember the Khmer Rouge." When she finally opens her clenched fist, the Young Man sees the hair ribbon of her child, whose death she witnessed immediately before her own.

I was struck by "Facing Death" and the choice of placing the S.21 photos in an art museum. As author Emma Willis commented later on in relation to my play: "The original appropriation of prisoners' images by the photographer was compounded by the subsequent secondary appropriation by the curators of the exhibition." This act of appropriation, I thought then, was the continuation of a type of "hall of mirrors," which had echoes of Nixon and Kissinger's secret carpet bombing of Cambodia, and of the decision to award the regime of Pol Pot Cambodia's contested seat in the United Nations.

SARAH: For decades the editorials are filed like clockwork. "Bring Pol Pot To Justice." Each time we break out the Tuol Sleng photos, and you see the victims staring out at you. Writing moralistic op-eds is the best we've ever been able to do. You keep secrets. Make vapid plans. Frankly, I don't make the stories, I just write them.

My character, Sarah Holtzman, in my later play *Silence of God* (2002) speaks to the United States' inability to acknowledge its role in creating the Khmer Rouge in the first place, due to its egregious Vietnam War policy. After the Cambodian Genocide, throughout the 1980s, the Khmer Rouge received political support from the United States, and Pol Pot died in 1998 without having been judged by an international tribunal for the crimes he had committed.

SARAH: What is Pol Pot's legacy? People throw acid on each other now. That's the latest. The smell of fear is everywhere. We can't turn away--it's a hall of mirrors, where everyone looks uglier and uglier…

(The poet Heng looks at her.)

HENG: Everyone.

The play, *Photographs from S.21,* premiered in New York City in 1998 and has subsequently been published and written about. In 2001, I received an Asian Cultural Council Artist's Residency Grant in Cambodia where I produced *Photographs from S.21* in Khmer at the French Cultural Center, with the help of Fred Frumberg from Amrita Performing Arts in Phnom Penh. Amrita is an international NGO committed to creating Cambodian contemporary dance

Photographs from *S.21*.

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and theater. This 2001 trip was my first to Cambodia, and I traveled there many times after that.

I had shared *Photographs From S.21* with filmmaker Rithy Panh, who offered to help cast the production in Phnom Penh. A colleague who prefers not to be identified translated the play into Khmer. Rithy chose Nandoeun (Doeun) Than, an actor at the National Theatre, to direct the play. He cast Sokly Morm as the Young Woman and Narith Roeun as the Young Man. Narith was the lead in Rithy's film, *One Evening After the War* (1998).

I recently exchanged with Fred Frumberg about the project. He told me that, when I had approached him to help produce *Photographs from S-21* in 2001, this was a time when the revival of Cambodia's performing arts legacy was still in its early and very fragile stages. Fred questioned the viability of introducing a very contemporary and potentially controversial project during this vulnerable revival process. However, he thought that the work could provide an opportunity for artists and technicians from the beleaguered National Theatre to draw parallels between their craft and their recent tumultuous past. Despite very limited resources, everyone involved with the project was passionately committed to the work. They savored the opportunity to tell their tragic stories in a theatrical setting that was at once painfully provocative and poetically cathartic.

The challenges and insights Fred described have become clearer to me so many years later. The performance of the play in Cambodia was much longer than it was in the United States, with a different kind of rhythm. In the United States, I was focused on moving the action of the play forward, while in Cambodia, I see more distinctly now why the performance was longer. The performers and audiences needed the spirits of the Young Woman and Man to remain with them, sometimes in silence, to allow these characters the breathing space to be seen and felt. Both the performers and audiences needed the possibility to grieve and cry.

Sokly, who played the Young Woman, chose to include a song in the play, as a means to console her unseen and lost child. She selected the melody of a lullaby and used a lyric from a well-known folk song, which is similar to a proverb in Cambodian society. With this lullaby, she was able to talk to her baby daughter and put her to sleep. The lyric itself was about the good and bad deeds of a society's leader and spoke to power and powerlessness.

I also remember being confused in rehearsal because, throughout the play, a musical sound kept on being repeated. When I asked what the meaning of the sound was, the artists looked at me equally confused, brought me to the pages of my text and pointed. In English, I had used the word "beat" to indicate pauses, and it had been misinterpreted as a "musical beat." We all laughed, and that was the end of the music.

At Tuol Sleng, the Khmer photographer Remissa Mak took photos of both Sokly and Narith, recreating the poses of the two victims in my play. Doeun, the director, planned to use Remissa's blown-up photos for the set design with

the idea that the souls of the photos would walk out of their frames, embodied by Sokly and Narith. Remissa asked me to lay on the ground and told me exactly how to clutch my fist like a child on the bottom of Sokly's black shirt, to recreate the child's hand reaching up to the Young Woman in the photograph.

Doeun's impressionistic light and sound design for the play surprised and intrigued me. In retrospect, the production team created a poetic and non-linear experience, something different than what I was used to in the United States. Doeun, an actor himself, created the sound for the production by breathing into a microphone from the booth in the back of the theater.

Every night before the play, the two actors prayed backstage, amidst offerings of fruit, incense, and candles, to copies of the photographs from the Documentation Center of Cambodia of the real Young Woman and Young Man that Youk Chhang had shown us. At the end of the performance, the theater was silent but for sniffling. And when the lights came up many people did not move from their seats.

Bunrith Suon, a founder of Amrita Performing Arts, recalls seeing the production in Phnom Penh in 2001. "I was too small to remember, but I am considered one of the children of the War and the survival of the killing fields. The only memory in my head was the killing. Therefore, I don't like watching stories from the Khmer Rouge, because I don't want to recall those dreadful and horrible memories. *Photographs from S.21* was the first play to awaken my thinking that this play should be a great educational tool in school."

With this production, I felt for the first time how a play could create a crucial dialogue between artists and audiences, as a means of education, raising awareness, and perhaps as the beginning of a healing process. The Khmer production went on to be performed in India, Denmark, Thailand and Singapore. As the play was produced around the United States and in other countries in English, its short length allowed the audience to engage in a theatrical experience that could be coupled with a meaningful discussion afterwards.

Cambodian human rights activist Arn Chorn Pond participated in conversations with the audience after the performances of *Photographs from S.21* in Phnom Penh. A few months ago, we evoked this experience together, and he mentioned the potential of theatre for reflecting and mourning the dead, and for providing the time for public acknowledgment and respect: "We have moved on slowly in our lives now from this horrible memory into the future, because we had the time, and the play allowed us to cry our guts out, to support and hear each other in our common sadness and grief to come together again."

What I tried to create with *Photographs from S.21*—I borrow here the words of Cynthia Cohen, who produced the play at Brandeis University—is a tender "encounter between two souls [that will open] a space for mourning and for healing, made sacred through the simple dignity of ritual." The actress, Sokly, as an expert and teacher of traditional Khmer theater, combined her art with both the ritual of prayer and the hope of healing. I saw firsthand how Sokly achieved cultural transmission as a teacher at the Royal University of Fine Arts. As a result, I started mentoring young students and taking a more active role in producing my plays, so that they could reach young and diverse audiences and provide an essential multi-voiced dialogue.

Also in the audience was the Cambodian politician and human rights activist, Sochua Mu. When I asked her a few months ago to recall with me her experience, she answered: "*Photographs from S.21* calls out for justice. The prolonged absence of justice for the survivors and the generations of Cambodians has great impact on the healing process. But for millions, returning to S.21 is too much of a cost. Those millions of Cambodians deal with the pain by taking action for change. Justice will not prevail if we don't look back, and take a constructive leap forward."

Looking towards the future, with the hope it may bring justice and healing, and retelling the past in a way that transforms it, without nostalgia or historical closure, is in my view the very essence of dramatic power. Indeed, the fluidity of time is one of the central themes in my plays. As Heng, a Khmer poet in my play *Silence of God,* says:

HENG: When I came back, Sarah, Cambodia had been dusted by a cloud. It was as if I was looking through a kaleidoscope that made my eyes red and my head ache. I couldn't adjust, couldn't see straight. The future, when I tried to adjust my eye slipped away, turning, back into the past before the war, after the war…

Maura Nguyen Donohue reviewed the play for *Flash Review Dispatch* when it was performed in Khmer in India. She recently shared more of her experience: "In 2004, I visited Tuol Sleng with several Southeast Asian and Asian American artists. The various differences amongst us were leveled by the stark reminder of incredible human to human cruelty. However, like the bullet holes in trees of My Lai, these museums and artifacts cannot activate compassion and understanding as readily as a play like *Photographs from S.21* does. In this work, the struggle to maintain a focus on the lives lost instead of the fetish of memorialized suffering remains insistent and complex. There is an infinite array of stories to be told of the Cambodian Genocide and this play points us towards the multilayered challenge of curating whose stories persist."

Photographs from S.21 was my answer to this challenge, a reflection on the act of remembering through small life-affirming stories of survival, and an attempt to create some space for grieving and healing. /