

THEATREWORKS



## THE CONTINUUM: BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

Conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen.  
In collaboration with Em Theay, Kim Bun Thom, Mann Kosal,  
Norlina Mohd, Sotho Kulikar, Thong Kim Ann and Yen.

Premiered at International Festival of Arts and Ideas,  
Yale University, USA (27 - 30 June 2001).

In Singapore at TheatreWorks Robertson Quay,  
The Bank of China Warehouse,  
75 - 77 Mohd Sultan Road.

**25 - 28 October 2001**

Tours to Europe, Australia and Asia in 2002.

"Bright red blood which covers the towns and plains of Kampuchea,  
our motherland, sublime blood of workers and peasants, sublime  
blood of revolutionary men and women **fighters!**"

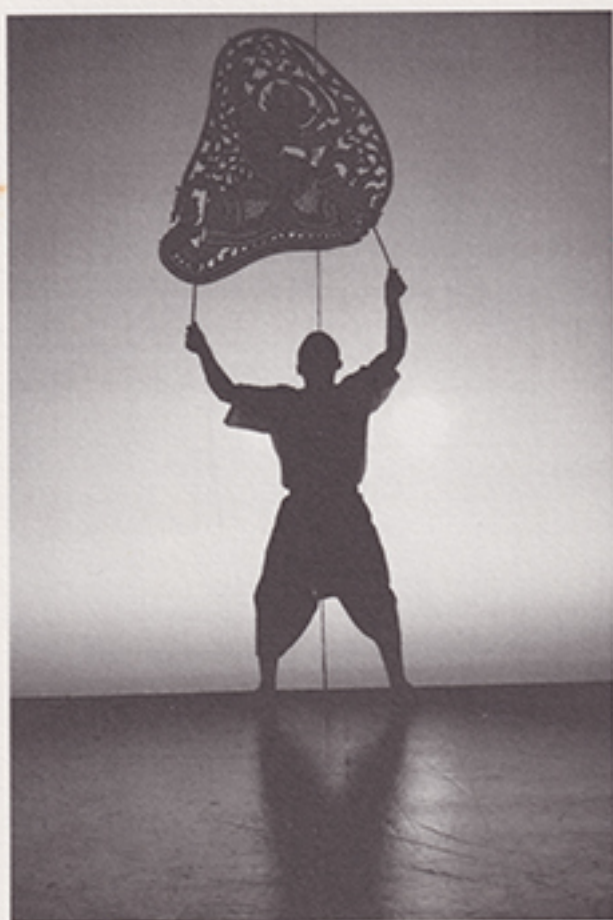
The national anthem  
of Cambodia during  
Khmer Rouge bloodbath.

"Rare are the countries who by their names evoke the image of a dancer. This is the privilege of Cambodia, from where the vision of the refined dancer rises."

The real-life story of Em Theay, master dancer of royal classical dance in Cambodia, who survived the scourge of the Khmer Rouge. Today she is a silver-haired live wire who wields discipline and rigour like a whip in the national troupe. Her daughter is also a dancer in the troupe, dancing the main role of the male demon which she inherited from her mother. This story of dance, passed through generations of mothers and daughters, becomes all the more horrific when one learns that 90% of the royal dancers, musicians, actors, playwrights, poets, artists were killed by Pol Pot in his fanatical attempt to set his country back to year zero, to purge the country of capitalist and impure elements.

Pol Pot's vision was to realise a peasant nation of self-reliant agricultural work brigades modelled on Mao's China. Reminiscent of Nazi Germany's genocide of Jews; technicians, teachers, monks or doctors were executed. Simply having fair skin or wearing glasses was cause of execution.

Fearful that the Khmer Rouge would kill them if they learnt of their previous connections to the palace, many dancers tried to hide their identities, telling cadres they were vegetable sellers, seamstresses or pedicab drivers.





"For the first time in ten years, we have been authorised to tell our stories and this helps to build a better sense of peace within ourselves," says one of the participating **artists**.

Em Theay, Bun Thom and Thong Kim Ann, the three female classical dancers who were trained at the Royal Palace prior to the Communist reign, and Mann Kosal, the puppet master, have told their stories in front of the cameras. The project may sometimes look like group therapy as Keng Sen has asked the participants to re-enact those moments of their lives which they have buried deep in their memories. Any suspicion of voyeurism is however hastily quelled and a friendly atmosphere of exchange and trust has been developed quickly. As part of the process, the group returned to Battambang, where few traces of the labour camps remain. Not every pilgrim was able to find the exact location of their former camp. "By participating in this project, the Cambodian artists realise that they cannot escape from the narrative of their lives. They have prepared themselves for it," explains Keng Sen. He himself wonders about the limits to these stories and how far he can push the performers' boundaries. Telling their life stories is necessary to create the performance. Each artist will interpret himself or herself on stage. "I do not want any post-modern spectacle, that may be too intellectual. It is their lives. I would only like to extract the essence, both artistic and individual," asserts Keng Sen. On the stage, no costume should be too heavy or colourful: the artists wear sarongs and Khmer scarves; the setting is minimalist and lighting is natural. For the artistic director, the process is more important than the result. He hopes to lead these wounded characters into artistic creation. "When you dance, you express yourself, you have chosen to be here and to master your life," he adds.



**Today**, only a handful of Khmer artists remain but they share a common desire to rebuild their Khmer culture. All the participants in this project are teachers, at the School of Fine Arts, at the National Theatre, in private schools or in associations. They are paid a small stipend by their schools and associations "it's nothing and the Government subsidies are really low which makes further development of our projects almost impossible" tells a participant. It would seem that the conservation of the temples, hundreds of years old, for tourism, is ranked more highly on the government agenda than the living cultural heritage. And Em Theay recalls "but Angkor without dance, without art, without life, it has no meaning".



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The Cambodian artists, filmed by Norlina Mohd and accompanied by Yen's soundscape, have come together to create a performance mixing dance, song and puppetry. Em Theay has survived under Pol Pot's regime and as she tells her story, tears flow, but she is never engulfed by her emotions. She talks about her fellow dancers and suddenly sings a song from the court repertoire. She tells of the hardships under the Khmer Rouge years where all music and dance were forbidden. She gets up from her chair and starts to dance a sequence. In those years, she would have been killed if she had danced the same sequence. She continues telling her story, never faltering, a conscience, a memory of the gash, which tore Cambodia apart...



"These are real-life events presented in such a way that they can be retold again and again not only for those who remember them but for all humanity. The horrors of the Khmer Rouge belong to the world; they act as grim reminders of depravity that we can ill afford to forget."

Ong Keng Sen  
Artistic Director  
TheatreWorks (Singapore) Ltd.

#### Credits

Text Fanny Landrieu-Charignon

Photos Valerie Oliveira

Design Yuencheewai

"In 'Continuum', Cambodian artists put on stage  
their own chilling stories of **survival**."

The New York Times

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