



Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 9 Summary
ALIVE ON STAGE: Storms, Histories, and Bodies
by Catherine Filloux

Introduction

Playwright Catherine Filloux frames her chapter by asking a question that has long haunted her: if the U.S. had not carpet-bombed Cambodia during the Vietnam War, might the country have avoided genocide? As an American, Filloux does not want to turn her attention from this lingering issue as so many in her country have. She writes, “The idea that the genocide was not inevitable reaffirmed my role in the tragedy. And because of my work over the past twenty years as a theatre artist with Cambodian-Americans here in the U.S. and with Cambodians in Cambodia, I have become a playwright dedicated to human rights.”

Filloux's main premise is that in striving to create plays of creative merit, developing the personal and group qualities that lead to meaningful cross-cultural relationships--a commitment to open-mindedness, risk-taking, self-reflection, and communication—also engenders high quality aesthetics, and therefore results in work of deep impact. Filloux’s essay also shows that when artists use the supportive atmosphere of the rehearsal space to create intra-societal dialogues and relationships, exciting hybrid forms of theatre are often an enriching outcome.

Context

Filloux presents her own biography as an American immigrant of French and Algerian descent, as well as the historical context of the 1975-79 Cambodian genocide, during which 1.7 million Cambodians died. The U.S. has never acknowledged its role in the carpet bombing that created the atmosphere for the rise of the Pol Pot regime. As of her writing, no serious justice has been served regarding genocide perpetrators. The existing tribunal court that opened in 2007 is flawed for many reasons, including its oversight by the current government, in which several participants of the Khmer Rouge regime play a role.

The Cambodian society and its people in diaspora suffer serious personal and social disability as a result of the horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Though some peace and justice oriented NGOs are starting to appear, very little has been achieved in addressing the lasting traumatic effects.

Filloux believes that in this realm of dysfunction, theatre can serve as a venue for needed dialogue, truth-telling, and acknowledgment. The legacy of the Cambodian genocide and

America's responsibility represent the themes of four plays and an opera by Filloux. Her plays emerge from much research within community settings and close collaboration with Cambodian survivors.

Artistic Partners and Relationships

Filloux focuses on her relationships with three Cambodian artists whose work, she feels, embodies John Paul Lederach's "moral imagination" in grappling with the country's legacy of genocide. Filloux holds deep respect for these artists, all of whom experienced the genocide: actor and teacher, Morm Sokly; composer, Him Sophy; and actor and cultural historian, Ieng Sithul. She writes, "My experience working with these three Cambodian artists has been a process of building bridges between two cultures and contexts so that we can reach out to audiences with performances that embody our commitments to peace."

Morm Sokly

A survivor of the regime that actively engaged in wiping out traditional cultural practices, actor Morm Sokly is dedicated to reintroducing her people to disappearing cultural forms and collaborating with other artists to invent new ones.

Sokly and Filloux first collaborated on *Photographs from S-21*, written by Filloux and performed by Sokly. The play is based on a Khmer Rouge extermination center in Phnom Penh where more than 14,000 Cambodians were murdered. Referencing the photographs that were often taken by the Khmer Rouge right before killing detainees, a young man and women step from their framed images on a museum wall. The characters share their stories and console one another. The young man brings the woman to a fountain outside the museum and performs a healing ceremony with incense and water.

Filloux describes the initial struggles of staging the play. As an American playwright, her desire was for the actors to embody the sharpest essence of the text so that the action could move steadily forward. But in rehearsal, the Cambodian actors were strong improvisers, stretching and adding their own meaning to the text as they worked. In compromising with the actors, Filloux learned she needed to embrace the vernacular knowledges they brought to the performance. Her concept of plot movement had to be balanced with a cultural context that required lingering. The author and the performers engaged in a process of building trust by listening openly to each other. The strong connection that arose flowered into a play with which audiences were able to deeply engage.

Filloux says of the experience, "Sokly creates real bonds with audiences based on truth telling that is central to the work of artists in the aftermath of conflict. The culture of peace is strengthened when audiences can become involved in the truth of a theatre piece and are allowed to imagine various alternatives to repression. It is also strengthened when audiences are permitted to remember and to choose their own interpretations for their memories, which are not directly attached to a political scenario."

Him Sophy

Through six years of collaboration, Filloux developed a libretto and Him Sophy created a score for the opera, *Where Elephants Weep*. The blend of two worlds and two cultures that resulted from their ongoing dialogue and back-and-forth process proves a metaphor for the opera's own subject: the clashes among Cambodians between tradition and modernity, between older and younger generations, as well as the effect of the diaspora on Cambodian culture. The music fuses traditional Cambodian music with Western rock and rap and is sung in English and Khmer.

Working with both Cambodian and American actors, singers, directors, choreographers, musicians, and designers presented Sophy and Filloux with many cultural and aesthetic conflicts. The creators seized the opportunity to learn and grow from the strenuous negotiations.

Filloux describes the impasse that occurred when Sophy insisted that young Cambodian women would never wear a particular length of sleeve used in the opera. Negotiating the views of indigenous Cambodians and diasporic Cambodians proved complex. Filloux and Sophy also struggled with their differently developed senses of how to preserve traditional culture while simultaneously developing stylistic innovations.

The two artists dedicated themselves to finding solutions to cultural issues in a way that allowed for both the process and end result to create opportunities for healing. They learned that “through the process of collaboration and witnessing, people can feel safe trying to express themselves—and failing and trying again—and they can feel their interconnectedness, learn to deal with differences productively, and together take part in making meaning out of their own life experiences.”

Ieng Sithul

Actor and singer Ieng Sithul played several roles in Filloux's *Where Elephants Weep*. Filloux sees Sithul as a person admirably promoting a balance between curiosity about “the other” and upholding his own cultural traditions.

Filloux explores another example of navigating cross-cultural tensions with the Lowell, MA workshop of *Where Elephants Weep*. She is impressed with Sithul's desire to enact deep emotion by allowing a monk in the play to passionately throw to the floor a sacred book. Filloux had questioned whether the scene was respectful enough to this revered population. And yet, Sithul was adamant that the female protagonist, Bopha could not touch her lover on stage, even accidentally. Filloux struggled with this severe-seeming limitation.

The writer, director, and actors worked together to find an interpretation of the scene in which the touching became subordinate to the male character's quest to discover his direction in life separate from his lover's. Filloux says of the process, “I believe that the rehearsal space creates a safe place to expose cultural assumptions, to challenge and defend them, and even to err—in a spirit of learning.”

Filloux also found impressive Sithul's actions to build relationships and community among the cast, crew and audience. Honoring the current moment in relationship to tradition, he led the creative team and the Lowell Cambodian community in a Khmer ritual before the workshop premiere.

The section ends on a dispirited note with Sithul's desperation that Cambodian politicians do not support the arts. Many young people in Cambodia don't pursue the field, and even teaching art is not a viable option because of economic concerns. Filloux describes her heartbreaking visit to the ill Morm Sokly as a case in point. Sithul grieves that the government isn't taking care of Sokly. Filloux explains, "Sokly's misdiagnosis and mistreatment are forms of structural violence that continue to be perpetuated thirty years after the genocide. The fact that this talented teacher and artist lives in poverty, in a country in which she cannot get a clear diagnosis for an illness that has made it impossible for her to act, teach, or write, is criminal."

Contributions to Peace

Filloux finds hope in the metaphor of the body, alive on stage, holding for artist and audience the gift of creation and change. Working with their bodies and experimenting with form, the Khmer artists described in her chapter defy the expectations of victimhood and invite communities into the necessary acts of telling truths, mourning losses, and becoming active participants in composing their lives.

With theatre as a guiding force, Filloux confronts the ties of Cambodian and American histories, "As an American, I am committed to playing a role in the positive transformation in Cambodia, and to taking a personal responsibility for how America acts as a whole. . . . By providing people who have been frozen in trauma a safe place in which to feel, by reviving and honoring traditions that were almost extinguished . . . and by animating people's imaginations, theatre can slowly help Cambodians heal from the tragic past and build a more peaceful future. And this empathy is what I hope can blaze a trail for America's future."

More from "Alive on Stage: Storms, Histories, and Bodies":

- Also in this chapter, Filloux lays out the complex history of the Khmer Rouge by describing, for example, how young boys were forced into service thus blurring the lines of victim and perpetrator.
- She offers portraits of her three collaborators, their personal histories and development within the theatre world in Cambodia.
- She also gives details of the plots and characters in her plays, quoting from narrative, poems, and songs.
- Filloux calls for a dynamic commitment to funding in support of a sustainable future that preserves and documents the traditional performing arts in Cambodia.