

## **Opinion Piece – Catherine Filloux**

This past December, when Cambodia convicted 36 people of “conspiracy to commit treason” in a mass trial, the story barely reached the United States. It was drowned out by news about other conflicts, especially the war in Ukraine. For me, however, the failure to cover the authoritarianism that continues to grip Cambodia a half century after America’s carpet-bombing campaign was a personal reminder to keep working.

The U.S. dragged Cambodia into the disastrous Vietnam War, hoping to use that country to fend off defeat or at least allow for an interval to withdraw from Vietnam. Instead, the intervention caused the conflict to spread, fueling a full-blown civil war in Cambodia. Between 1975 and 1979, the policies of the Khmer Rouge under the ruthless dictator Pol Pot led to the death of an estimated 2 million people, including eighty to ninety percent of all of Cambodia’s artists and intellectuals. In addition to leaving behind millions of devastated families wracked with inter-generational grief and trauma, the war wiped out historic artistic traditions, creating a void that persists until today.

In 1989, I read an article that described how at least 150 Cambodian women had experienced psychosomatic blindness after seeing loved ones killed by the Khmer Rouge. I started to dig into the history and the more I learned the more I felt compelled to write plays that might serve to raise awareness about the U.S.’s devastating actions.

This may sound naïve; after all, how can I, a playwright and activist, offset the grief and anguish the biggest superpower caused, at least in part, for millions of Cambodians? While I might not have the power to redirect the course of history, I do believe that we all bear the responsibility to try and lessen suffering in the world. The stage provides me with the medium for addressing people’s pain along with a stage for imagining a better future. As actress Tonya Pinkins has said: “I think that every revolutionary idea begins in the theatre, and that we have a responsibility as theatre artists to put forth the vision of what we want our world to look like.”

My first step was to conduct an oral history project with 23 Cambodian traumatized women who were living in the Bronx after fleeing the Cambodian killing fields. Their stories of the brutality they faced and their ongoing struggles with poverty and isolation formed the basis for my play “Eyes of the Heart,” which ran off Broadway. A follow-up play, “Photographs from S-21,” was based on black and white pictures of a Cambodian man and woman, taken at a Khmer Rouge extermination center moments before their execution, that come to life while on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art.

“Photographs from S-21” was performed in Phnom Penh by renowned Cambodian actors who had survived the Khmer Rouge. During conversations after the play, the actors and audience members spoke about the cathartic effect of the play as an acknowledgement of their collective pain. Nobel Peace Prize-nominated politician and activist Sochua Mu told me: “‘Photographs from S-21’ calls out for justice. Justice will not prevail if we don’t look back and take a constructive leap forward.”

In the absence of a government apology – and the U.S. owes many apologies to many groups of people and many countries – individual acknowledgments of our collective responsibility to one another can begin to fulfill the promise of a more humane environment for the children whose lineages have been tainted with trauma. Playwrights can create a platform for truth-telling and reconciliation that will be woven into the history records, even as the pain reverberates across generations.

In 2017, Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered the highest court to dissolve the main opposition party, crushing the country’s efforts at democracy. Since then, there have been several mass trials and over a hundred people have been convicted of “treason,” including Sochua Mu, now in exile. Many other activists including Cambodian-American Theory Seng were convicted in a mass trial last June and are currently serving sentences for “treason” in Cambodian prisons.

My commitment to telling and retelling the story of the Cambodian genocide (along with other global horrors) persists with the hope that the United States and the United Nations will one day act courageously to right past wrongs. In the absence of such acts, perhaps my work, along with other artists, can serve to transform some of the pain into healing and purpose.

Examining the role of the United States in global politics, with its accompanying personal costs, is the thread that binds my entire body of work, which includes 20 plays that call for justice in areas that extend from global military fiascos and political asylum to voting rights and mass incarceration to women’s rights and post-traumatic stress disorder. With that in mind, I co-founded Theatre Without Borders, an organization that for the past 20 years has gathered international theatre artists to work together surrounding topics of pressing need. My work with the Theatre Without Borders community gave rise to The Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at Brandeis University. Within this context, both national and international, my emphasis has been and continues to be a focus on human rights.

We as playwrights cannot change history or wipe away people’s trauma. But art is generative. It makes beautiful things seem possible even when recounting stories of darkness and pain. So when the evening news ignores travesties that require our attention, the stage beckons, reminding us that change is always possible.

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