

KON

The Cinema of Cambodia



កុង

រោងភាពយន្តខ្មែរ



*Le Roi-Père
Norodom Sihanouk
du Cambodge*

à

**Docteur Tilman Baumgärtel
Royal University of Phnom Penh
Phnom Penh
CAMBODGE**

Docteur,

Je vous exprime ma profonde gratitude pour votre email en date du 11
Mai 2010 et pour votre appréciation de mon œuvre cinématographique.

Avec mes chaleureux encouragements et vœux de réussite dans vos
projets,

Je vous prie, Docteur, d'agréer l'assurance de ma haute et affectueuse
considération.

Norodom Sihanouk

Palais Royal,
Phnom Penh, le 25 Mai 2010

Preface



The editorial team in front of DMC building / Neang Eric

Kon", the title of this magazine, means "film" in Khmer. In this magazine, we want to talk both about the past and the present of Khmer film. The Cambodian film industry so far has not recovered from the historic catastrophe of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror from 1975 to 1979. After brief spikes in production around 1990 and in the last decade, the situation today is rather bleak. Most of the once over 30 cinemas in Phnom Penh are closed and have been turned into restaurants, hotels and snooker halls. Only very few films, most of them cheap horror flicks, are being produced today.

It wasn't always like that. The years between 1960 and 1975 are known as the "Golden Age of Khmer Cinema" today. In that short period, the small country produced almost 400 films. Some of the big stars like Kong Sam Oeun, Vichara Dany or Dy Saveth supposedly starred in up to 100 productions. Only around 30 of these films survive, remnants of a national cinema that was full of miracles and beauty: Kings with magic powers, giants, witches, flying horses, gods that walk the earth and a girl with snakes instead of hair are only some of the sensations that the film makers of that time put on the screen despite the very limited technical means that they had at their disposal.

But there were also contemporary stories that show a surprisingly cosmopolitan and modern country. And there were the films by His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, one of the most prolific film makers in Southeast Asia, who tried to use the medium of cinema as a tool for nation building. These films were part of a much larger renaissance of Khmer culture in the post-colonial period that included architecture, literature, pop music and visual art.

I have learned a lot, while we worked on this magazine. I have been invited to the homes of stars like the indispensable Dy Saveth and directors like Fay Sam Ang. The students and I pored over old newspapers and magazines in the National Archive and the National Library, and watched old movies at Bophana Center. Other fans and collectors, but also directors like Ly Bun Yim, Mao Ayuth and Yvon Hem gave us access to rare memorabilia from that period that ended so abruptly in 1975. We even got a letter of support from King Father, reproduced on the left. *Akun chran* to all of them, but most of all to my students who worked so hard on this project and uncovered so much more material than we were able to include into this magazine.

We hope that by calling attention to the glorious past of Cambodian cinema, we can play a small part in creating the desire for new films that can match those of the "Golden Age". It is about time...

Dr. Tilman Baumgärtel
Department of Media and Communication, Royal University of Phnom Penh

Table of Content

Department of Media and Communication (DMC)
Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)
Russian Blvd., Phnom Penh
Tel : (855) 23 884 408
Fax: (855) 23 884 408
Email: dmc@dmc-cci.edu.kh

Supervisor:
Dr. Tilman Baumgärtel

Design Supervisor:
Christine Schmutzler

Magazine Designers:
Dara Saoyuth
Hong Channpheaktra
Lang Mesa
Vorn Makara

Writers and Editors:
Khut Sornnimul
Kim Samath
Koam Tivea
Mak Kuleka
Noy Kimhong
Sun Narin
Suy Heimkhemra

Photo Editors:
Nou Uddom
Tang Khyhay
Veng Rachana

Researchers:
Lay Rattana
Ly Youy
Ngo Menghourng
Sok Leng
Sun Mesa
Tet Chan

Cover Illustration:
Lim Keav

Printed with the kind support of the
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Phnom
Penh

Printed by VS Vann Sophea Printing
House, Phnom Penh, 2010

The Golden Age	6
Cambodian films from the 1960s and 70s were well-loved by the audience and are still fondly remembered today	
Vox Pop	10
How was the cinema of Cambodia in the past?	
Directed by: The King	11
His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk was a prolific filmmaker	
“I am the luckiest person”	12
From movie star to waitress and back again: the roller coaster life of Dy Saveth	
The tricks of Ly Bun Yim	14
How the director created the low-tech special effects in his masterpiece “12 sisters”	
Profile Ly Bun Yim	15
Records of a terrible history	16
78 documentaries from the Pol Pot regime still exist today	
From Golden Age to Dark Age	18
The reasons for the decline of the Cambodian film industry	

Profile Lim Keav	19
Profile Rithy Panh	21
Movies with a message	22
Poan Phoung Bopha is Cambodia’s most successful woman film maker	
Made in Cambodia	24
Six films that were shot here	
The first gay movie in Cambodia	25
“High School Love’s Story” want to paint a realistic picture of the situation of homosexuals in Cambodia	
International Film Festival	26
Five tips from Mao Ayuth	26
How to make a good film	
Ten Khmer films you should know	27

We would like to extend our thanks to Rabea Brauer (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Phnom Penh) for the generous financial support in printing this magazine.

In addition, we would like to acknowledge the help of our sources Yvon Hem, Ly Bun Yim, Mao Ayuth, Tea Lim Koun, Chom Vichet, Min Sitha, Fay Sam Ang, Poan Phoung Bopha, Dy Saveth and Svay Socheata for granting us interviews.

We are most grateful to Davy Chou and Kon Khmer Koun Khmer, Kirstin Wille, Michelle Vachon (Cambodian Daily), Bun Tha Rum (Phnom Penh Post), Nadi Tofighian (University of Stockholm), Gaetan Crespel and Lim Sophorn (Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center), Keo Siti (University of California Berkeley), Nico Mesterharm and Lydia Parusol (Meta House), Som Sokun (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) and Sin Chan Saya (Cinema Department) for their support in the production of this magazine.

We would like to thank Tieng Sopheak Vichea, Andreas Grigo, Peou Chivoin, Muong Kanha Pidor, Kol Chanmakara and Touch Yinmony from the Department of Media and Communication. Furthermore, we would like to thank Lim Khy, Chhun Lim and Y Dary from the National Archive and Khlot Vibolla from the National Library. In addition to that we received invaluable documents from the private collections of film fans Huy Vathana, Hun Sovannet and Hem Pheara.

Finally, our special thanks to all classmates as they cooperated closely, and to Christine Schmutzler for helping us with the design.



Tea Lim Kun with Dy Saveth and Chea Yuthan shooting “Pov Chhouck Sor”/ Tea Lim Kun

The Golden Age

Cambodian films from the 1960s and 70s were well-loved by the audience and are still fondly remembered today

Between 1960 and 1975, the film industry of Cambodia developed quickly. Approximately 350 films were produced and screened across the country in a period that is today perceived as the “Golden Age of Khmer Cinema”. It began, when Som Sam Al made his debut *Phkar Rik Phkar Rouy* (Blossoming Flower, Withering Flower), a silent movie, with a 16-milimeter camera in 1958. Previously, only King Sihanouk

had made a number of short films that were not screened in public. Som Sam Al showed his film in the cinema, which makes him the first commercial film producer in Cambodia.

Most of the films that were made in the following years were based on Cambodian legends, but occasionally also on contemporary subjects, and were beloved by the majority of the audience. “The films that were made between 1960 and 1975 were

very good, both in terms of theme and performance,” recalls Kong Sokha, a grocery seller.

Hong Saovandy, a government official at the Ministry of Transportation, agrees: “I prefer the movies that were made at that time to those produced today. I feel that the movies from the 1960s look real and natural, and the actors really made an effort to impersonate what they were playing.”

Establishing a film industry in Cambodia was a particular concern of King Sihanouk. He sent a number of people, including Roeum Sophon and Iev Panakar, to France to study film production. However, these foreign-trained film makers did not contribute much to the development of the film industry in Cambodia, but mostly worked on the films that the King himself was making. (A portrait of the king as film maker is on page 11.)

Rather, it were self-taught directors, that developed the film industry of the country. These film makers include Ly Bun Yim, best known for his technical skills and for the special effects in his movies, Tea Lim Koun, who even won awards for his movies abroad, and Yvon Hem, who also worked as a cinematographer for other film directors.

And the audience took notice of their directors: house wife Eoeur Heng, who was an ardent viewer of Khmer films in the 1960s, says: “Directors like Yvon Hem and Ly Bun Yim were really good both as script writers and as directors.”

Marcel Camus, a French film director, was another person that contributed to the advancement of the Cambodian film industry. In 1962, Camus – best known for his international success *Orfeu Negro* (1959) – shot the film *L’oiseau de paradis* (Bird of Paradise) in Cambodia with an exclusively local cast, that included actors that went on to become stars in the local film industry, such as Sak Sisbourng and

Meas Sam El. And a young Yvon Hem, who was production assistant on the film, got bitten by the cinema bug, started to teach himself cinematography with the help of a French correspondence course, and eventually formed a production company with his sister Narie Hem, who had been the female lead in the movie.

Even though there was no film school, Cambodian directors managed to make films that were of good quality and entertained the people. Tea Lim Koun, one of the principal film directors of that time, says: “Since there was no school that taught us how to make movies, you had to have a lot of talent, if you wanted to be successful.”

Each director had his own method for making good movies. For Koun, it is the cinematography and the directing of the actors that have the greatest significance for the quality of a film: “The movement of the camera is very important. To show the actors how to act is another major factor in making movies, because it is the acting that touches the hearts of the audience,” he says.

At the same time, directors continuously had to come up with new ideas to keep people interested in their films, and they had to cater to ever-changing styles and tastes. Koun says: “When I realized that the audience was fed up with melodramas such as my movies *Lea Huey Duong Dara* (Good Bye Star) and *Vil Vin Na Bong* (Come Back My Baby), I produced



“Preay Kan Toung Kheav” Poster / Hun Sovannet

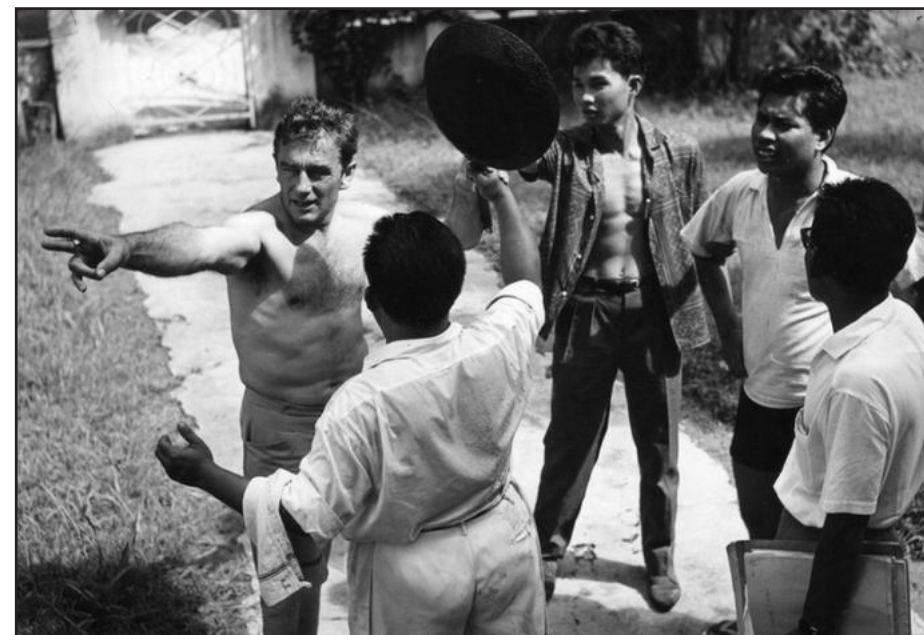
the comedy, *A Chey Neang Krot* (Mr. Chey and Ms. Krot) which surprised my audience. Then I started to shoot fairy tale stories like *Peous Keng Kang* (Snake Hair Girl).”

The young directors of Cambodia with their relatively limited experience had to deal with fierce competition: In cosmopolitan and multicultural Phnom Penh, movies from all over the world were shown: Bollywood productions were particularly popular with Cambodians, but movies from France and Hollywood also drew audiences. Films from Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan and even Cuba, Germany and the Soviet Union were also screened in local cinemas at that time.

Yet, Ly Bun Yim, director and owner of Ron Teas Pich Pheap Yun or Flash Diamond Production, says: “People preferred my movies to Thai movies, because my movies had both action and comic scenes.”

Preap Van, a driver, says: “Most Cambodians preferred Khmer movie to foreign movie from France and India because they enjoyed the beauty of the actors and actresses as well as their performance. And they wanted to know about Khmer culture and history and to support Khmer art.”

One major selling point in the Cambodian fantasy films of that time were scenes that showed wonders and miracles: flying horses, man-made earthquakes and



Crew of Marcel Camus during the shooting of “L’oiseau du paradis” in 1961 / Charles Meyer collection, National Archive

thunder, giants and witches were among the sensations that lured the audience to the theatres.

However, as there was no laboratory in Cambodia at that time, film directors like Ly Bun Yim sent their films to France and Hong Kong to have them developed.

The early Khmer films did not even have a sound track, since the equipment to make sound films was not available in the country. Therefore they had to be dubbed during the screening. “Around 1960, local films had no sound,” remembers Khe Kheang, a businessman. “But at Hawai Cinema, there was a man named Ao Phor, who could dub up to seven different voices at the same time, including women, men, old people, young people and so on. He could even remember the whole script without looking at it.”

Eventually, in the early 1960s, Roem Sophon, a film technician, brought equipment to Cambodia that allowed for the production of sound films.

Despite the technical shortcomings, film directors still could make good movies. For example, *Sobasith* (Partridges) and *Punthysen Neang Kongrey* (12 Sisters) by Ly Bun Yim were among the movies that were admired by the audiences because of their good special effects. (Some of his tricks are described on page 14.) These films were so popular that they were screened for months, and people went to see them again and again.

Nou Sandab, who was a successful actress in the 1960s, says: “A movie like *Orn*

Euy Srey Orn (Khmer after Angkor) was screened for half a year.”

Lay Sovan, a businessman from Takeo province, says that he went to see the same movie a few times, when he had the money. He also recalls that movies were not only screened in cinemas, but also in pagodas, when there were village ceremonies or inaugurations of new temples. “In the country side,” he remembers, “when people went to watch movies at the pagoda, they always brought a mat to spread out on the ground and watched until midnight.”

Som Sokun, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, explains that at that time only very few people had television, another important reason why the majority went to the cinema to watch movies: “They needed entertainment after working and eating.” Government official Hong Saovandy remembers: “At that time, there was just one black and white TV channel that rarely showed movies. Therefore, going to the cinema in the evening became very popular among the Khmer, and that included my family. In the evening, we used to just lock our house door, and go out to enjoy a movie.”

At that time, there were about 30 movie theaters in Phnom Penh and around 23 film production companies. Eang Lang, a businesswoman, remembers: “In Phnom Penh were more cinemas than in the provinces, because the people in the city had more money than in the country side. You could hardly find a big cinema



Crowd outside Phnom Pich Cinema / Charles Meyer Collection, National Archive

in the provinces.” And she adds: “During the festival days or on public holidays, it was almost impossible to get a ticket for a film screening, if you did not buy one in advance.”

Grocery vendor Kong Sokha remembers how “people bought tickets in bulk, and resold them for a higher price, when the cinema was sold out.” Not everybody had to go through such hassles, though: “VIP tickets were given for free to people working in the government and other institutions. Those tickets were delivered with the newspaper in the morning,” remembers Koy Pov, whose husband was a military commander at that time.

Government officer Hong Saovandy recalls that the prices of the tickets depended on the movie, but were typically between five and ten riel, equivalent to 5.000 and 8.000 riel today. “It was so stuffy in the cinemas, because there were a lot of people and only a few fans,” he remembers. “The seats and the people in the cinema were often very smelly.”

The people in the theatres were deeply involved in the movies they watched: Hong Saovandy recalls how “people shouted and laughed, when they watched scary or funny movies.” During tragic moments, both men and women cried their eyes out.

At other times, they talked back to the people on the screen. If an actor and actress played a mean or evil character, they often would get upset with them. Kong Sokha said: “They would say that a cruel character should be killed.” Tea Kimyeng, a tailor in Phnom Penh, recalls: “When they watched actresses like Sak Sisbourn playing an evil character, they hated her and complained about her.”



Yvon Hem at a party with Kong Sam Oeun and other film stars in 1960s / Yvon Hem

Candy, popcorn, dry lotus, water melon and pumpkin seed, sugar cane, ice cream and bread were favorite snacks of the cinema audience of the time. In order to attract the attention of the audience, cinema owners put up huge, hand-painted posters in front of the cinema. In order to take advantage of the popularity of certain movies, some films were turned into cartoon books that were widely sold. Kong Sokha says: “These cartoons came out, when the film was not screened in the cinema anymore.”

Most of the movies of that time had a good number of songs, which added to the popularity of the films. Driver Preap Van says: “I like *Orn Euy Srey Orn* (Khmer after Angkor) by Ly Bun Yim, because the actors were so beautiful and the story was so deep, but also because of the lovely songs sung by Sin Sisamuth and Ros Serey Sothea.” Some of these songs are still popular today. They are still played on radio and television, or even used for ceremonies such as weddings.

Even though there was no acting school, Cambodian actors continuously delivered fine performances. And the Khmer cinema of that time had its share of stars that kept people going to the movies. There was, for example, Vichara Dany, the greatest actress of that time. She supposedly acted in 120 movies, in at least 63 of which she performed together with the handsome male star Kong Sam Oeun. She started her acting career in 1967 with the movie *Loheth Veasna* (Fate Blood), and is believed to have performed more than two hundred songs in these films.

Kong Sam Oeun, an extremely productive and popular legendary actor, starred in 140 films. His first movie was *Koth Muoy Py Neak* (One Coffin Two People), and like Vichara Dany, he performed more than two hundred songs. Chea Yuthorn acted in seventy six films from 1963 to 1975 and performed a hundred songs

Som Van Soudany, an extremely prolific movie star, started her career in the second half of the 1960s and became famous overnight. She and Kong Sam Oeun were one of the most popular couples in Khmer cinema, and they starred together in at least 18 films.

Dy Saveth was the first female icon of Khmer cinema, and today she is its living legend. (See the profile of her on page 12.) She became Miss Cambodia in 1959,

and remained a superstar throughout the 1960s. Her screen partner was often Nop Nem, who starred in at least 60 films, many of which are legendary today.

Then there was Saksi Sbong, a vamp, who was famous for playing sexy villains and temptresses. She often played the adversary of Dy Saveth.

Virak Dara was among the most reclusive stars of the Khmer cinema in the 1960s: She was only in ten films in a decade. She is often regarded as the most reserved Khmer actress as she acted only in the films of Ly Bun Yim, her husband.

Funnyman Trente Deux with his trademark laughter was often the comic sidekick of the burly Mondoline, who also excelled in playing bad guys.

Many of these actors learned the tricks of the trade from the film makers who directed them, and went on to produce movies by themselves. Dy Saveth, Kong Sam Oeun and Chea Yuthorn all used their popularity as actors to become

filmmakers in their own right. Kong Sam Oeun's *Sobin Thida* (Thida's Dream) was the first movie produced by the popular actor, while Dy Saveth's debut was *Teuk Pnek Leu Khnong Phnom* (Tears on a Mountain).

The “Golden Age of Khmer Cinema” ended abruptly, when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Actors such as Kong Sam Oeun, Chea Yuthorn, Sak Sisbourn, Som Van Soudany and Vichara Dany and others were killed, while some actors and directors like Ly Bun Yim, Tea Lim Koun and Dy Saveth managed to flee abroad. Then no more fiction films were produced.

Today, most of the films that have been made during that period are lost. Only 33 movies are still available on pirated VCDs sold at the markets.

They serve as a reminder for the young generation what a well-developed film industry Cambodia once had. *Koam Tivea*, *Sun Narin*, *Mak Kuleka*, *Kim Samath*



Dy Saveth and Kong Sam Oeun in the movie “The Snake Girl II”, shot in Taiwan / Dy Saveth

How was the cinema of Cambodia in the past?



Reach Sambath, Chief of the Public Affair Section of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

"During the Khmer Rouge period I watched my first propaganda film in 1977. It was a documentary about a visit of Comrade Cham Yeoun Kuy, a Chinese leader, to Cambodia. He walked with Pol Pot, who was for the first time portrayed publicly in that film. Since my leg got hurt, my mates had to take turns to put me on their backs and walked for six kilometers to see that documentary.

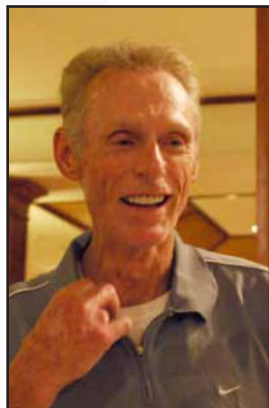
After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, when I was in grade 5, most of the films that were screened in Cambodia came from socialist countries, like the Sowjetunion and Czechoslovakia. Most people were still afraid of going to the cinema, because there might be bomb attacks by minor Khmer Rouge soldiers that

still tried to create chaos in the country."



Siang Sineng, housewife "In 1985 or 86, there were no Cambodian films. When I went to a cinema at that time, I could watch only Indian and a few Chinese and Vietnamese films. Cinema at that time was not like the cinema nowadays. It was often just in somebody's flat. We sat on wooden chairs like in school. I remember that there were only two cinemas. One was at what is now Klaing Rom Sev market and the other one was located in front of today's Sammakya Kindergarten. These cinemas seated less than 100 people, and they had two or three shows a day. Cambodian cinema started to flourish only after 1987. At that time, when I came back from the market, I always dropped by at Hawaii Cinema to see whether there was a new movie on. If there was, I would stay and ask the Cyclo

driver to take home my groceries so that I could watch the movie."



Matt Franjola, Associated Press (AP) correspondent in 1975.

"In the seventies, one of our freelancers at Associated Press (AP) was Sun Heang who was later killed by the Khmer Rouge. Before he joined AP he had worked as a live dubber in the cinema. He was improvising the dialogue when foreign films were screened. He would sit in the projection room with a couple of other guys, and they would each voice some of the characters in movies that were not dubbed into Khmer. So he would be the bad guy with the deep voice, and he would be the good guy with a higher pitched voice. He would be the lover. He would do three or four accents, and switch back and forth between them. He was particularly good as the bad guy. The Cambodians have these plays, where the bad guys are really bad and the good guys are really good, so I guess a lot came from that. He had to do that for every single screening of a movie, every day. They typically showed the films three times a day, so it must have been really tough work. That was

probably one reason, why he came to work for us. He became a really good reporter, while he was working for AP. Maybe that came from his experience watching films over and over – he had an eye for details."



Lay Phon, housewife "The first and last time my family and I went to the cinema, was to the Vimean Tep Cinema to watch the film The Killing Fields. It was so depressing that all people cried, while we watched how the Khmer Rouge killed people. Unfortunately, I could only watch the film for about 15 minutes. I had to leave the cinema because of the crowd and the cigarette smoke there."



Korm Chanthay, owner of the cinema in Soriya Shopping Center and of a movie production company. When I was young, my favorite movie was White Elephant King, directed

by Tea Lim Koun. It was in 1970, when I saw that movie at Hemacheat Cinema. I loved White Elephant King very much and I always kept this idea with me. The reason I still remember most of the film now is because of the quality of that film and the actors involved such as Dy Saveth. Later in 2001, I decided to remake that film after I went to study how to make movies in Thailand, and I got successful with it as people came and drove to watch my movie. It made a big profit."



Ly Pihourng, housewife "When I was a child in the 1960s, I was living in Kratie province. In the town, there were only two cinemas. One screened only Chinese films, while the other screened both Khmer and French films. Every time I went to see a movie, my parents bought only two tickets for themselves and we children sat on their laps. Sometimes, I could find an empty seat for myself. Whenever I wanted to get into the cinema by myself, I would just wait at the door of the cinema to enter with elder people, and the guards thought I came with my parents."

Directed by: The King

His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk was a prolific filmmaker



King Sihanouk gives an award to director Tea Lim Koun / Tea Lim Koun

King Norodom Sihanouk did not only lead Cambodia into independence from France in 1953. He also made almost 50 fiction and documentary films.

At the age of 19, King Sihanouk bought himself a 16mm camera to shoot short films with titles such as *Tarzan among the Kuoy* (Kuoy are the ethnic minority living in Northeast Cambodia) or *Double Crime on the Maginot Line*. In 1965, he made his first feature-length movie, *Apsara*.

At that time he was prime minister after having abdicated in favour of his father in 1955.

His film *Prachea Komar* (The Little Prince) from 1968 starred his son, current King Norodom Sihamoni. Sihanouk himself also often acted in his own movies, and composed songs for his films.

Through his initiatives in the late 1960s, the first International Film Festival was held in Phnom Penh which brought both Cambodian and international film into the public spotlight. The king himself won the Golden Apsara Award for *The Little Prince*.

Eliza Romey argues in her thesis on Sihanouk's films, that they "were means of breaching the socio-cultural divide between his modern leadership and the Khmer... For Sihanouk, the films created a rapport with the otherwise politically distant Khmer and marginalized Cambodia's elected representative."

In addition, he thought that films like *Lord Jim* (1964) by Richard Brookes showed Cambodia as an undeveloped society which was detrimental to Cambodia's international reputation. Instead,

he featured traditional Khmer arts such as dancing in his movies. Sihanouk also made efforts to improve the film industry and the quality of Cambodian filmmaking.

He sent people to study filmmaking in France in the late 1940s. In order to help filmmakers work profitably, he lowered the tax for Khmer films. After being ousted from power by a *coup d'état* in 1970, he continued to work on his films during his exile in North Korea and China.

When he returned to Cambodia in 1991 after 13 years in exile, he started to make films in the country again. *Miss Asina* from 2006 was his last work. In February 2010, he issued a statement on his website saying that he has stopped all film productions. *Vorn Makara*, *Hong Chanpheaktra*

“I am the luckiest person”

From movie star to waitress and back again:
the roller coaster life of Dy Saveth



Dy Saveth dancing with Chea Yuthan in the 1960s / Dy Saveth

You might imagine Dy Saveth to be living in a modern and luxurious villa full of expensive furniture. You'd be wrong: The Cambodian movie star lives in a modest flat in an apartment building in a suburb of Phnom Penh that is decorated with simple, but lovingly arranged furniture.

The walls are plastered with many photos, remnants of her eventful life. During our interview, there is the fre-

quent sound of a parrot calling her “Mak Veth Mak Veth” (“Mother Veth Mother Veth”). A small dog sleeps cuddled up next to her feet, while she recalls her adventurous life.

She was a famous movie star during the 1960s, and survived the Khmer Rouge regime, when she went into exile in France for two decades. In her temporary home country, she turned from famous star to nanny and waitress.

The career of Dy Saveth started when she became Miss Cambodia in 1959, when she was only 16 years old. Director Uong Kanthok, the owner of Korng Chak Production, made her a movie star, when he cast her in his film *Khbon Chivit* (Raft Life) in 1960. She became popular with an audience that called her “queen of tears” after she played the part of a poor orphan. The movie sold out Phnom Penh's Hawaii Cinema for over a month.

At the age of 20, Dy Saveth met her husband Houy Keng, when she worked on her first international production in Hong Kong. The film was called *Hous Hery Cheat Nis* (It Is Over for This Life). It was his first work as a director, and he was the leading man.

Soon after their marriage, they formed a new production company, Sovann Kiri, in Cambodia. And the newly-weds gave all they had: Not only did they co-produce all their films. Saveth also worked as scriptwriter, director, costume designer and make-up artist, while her husband served as cinematographer. “We did everything by ourselves and we hired no one, since we wanted to save money for more profit. In our film *Kraper Chhara-vann* (The Crocodile Man), he was the star. So, when he started to perform, I was the one who controlled the camera,” she recalls.

Despite the many commitments in her own company, Dy Saveth never said no to any requests from other producers who asked her to star in their movies. Even when she was five months pregnant, this woman with her strong determination would spend the whole day starring for another production – even if she was supposed to smear her face with mud or run over the set. When she came home at night, she wrote scripts for her own production company.

“My main problem was that I was always tired, since I had to wake up at 6 o'clock to prepare the costumes for the actors and attend to their hair and make-up. The faces of me and my husband looked so pale at that time,” she remembers.

In ten years Sovann Kiri Production produced more than ten films, before the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. In one of them, *Sayon Toc Yom* (Gibbon Cry in The Afternoon), she even had to dress up as a boy.

One of the most significant films was *Thida Sork Pous* (The Snake Girl) which was originally shot in Cambodia and later remade in Taiwan, with Saveth as leading lady in both versions. Dy Saveth remembers: “I had to wear snakes as my hair. At first, my husband asked me if I was afraid of snakes. I said: ‘Everyone is afraid of them, but we should try, as audiences want something that is strange.’ Once, a snake bit me when I pulled its tail. I later found its tooth in my face while I was washing my face, but I was not afraid, since I knew it was not venomous.”

When asked about the lifestyle of the movie stars of the past, she answers that it was not so different from today: “Everyone cheered at me when they met me - like the fans do today. Sometimes, I and other showbiz people went to dance at the Delta Bar near Pochentong airport. As my house had a big yard, I used to have parties there, and invited my colleagues and friends. And I often went to shop with them or to sing karaoke.”

Despite the fact that a civil war had begun in Cambodia in 1970, Dy Saveth had no any intention to go abroad, even though she was frequently encouraged to leave by her colleagues and shooting



Dy Saveth on cover of East German Magazine NBI / Archive



Dy Saveth today / Dara Saoyuth

became increasingly dangerous.

“One day, when our team was shooting in Kampong Cham, a rocket exploded near our location. We kept encountering this kind of situation, but we luckily survived all. Sometimes, we had to pack our equipment in a hurry to escape from rocket bombings,” she remembers.

In March 1975, Dy Saveth finally decided to go to Thailand with her uncle's family. The Khmer Rouge were closing on Phnom Penh at that time.

“There were many sand sacks and trenches around the airport. When we wanted to get on our plane, there was an attack, and the plane did not land,” she says.

Eventually, she was able to fly to Battambang with the helicopter of a general that her uncle met accidentally at the airport. They arrived in Battambang in the evening and proceeded to Thailand the following day, where she stayed with a friend of her aunt-in-law.

When she heard a month later, that the war was over and the Khmer Rouge had taken over power, she tried to return to Cambodia, because she wanted to celebrate Khmer New Year there. The Cambodian embassy in Thailand warned her not to return to Cambodia. After a number of visits to the embassy, the ambassador reproached her for having no clue about what was going in her own country.

Later she learned from a friend, that the Khmer Rouge had asked the Thai government to send back all Khmer people to Cambodia. She feared however, that

if she went back, she would not be able to return to Thailand. She decided to move to France. However, there was one obstacle: She needed a supporter who was living in France as her guarantor.

Again, luck was on her side, when she met the French owner of the garage in Phnom Penh, where she used to have her car fixed. He forwarded her picture with a letter to a lady friend in Paris. “This lady invited me to come and stay with her in Paris,” she explains. She had to sell all her jewelry in order to buy the plane ticket to Paris. “By the time I arrived in France, I had only 100 U.S \$ left,” Dy Saveth says.

Her host in Paris was kind, and took her shopping and to restaurants. She met a Cambodian friend in Paris, who invited her to stay with his relatives, who had emigrated from Cambodia to Nice.

“My supporter was upset because of that, but she allowed me to leave after my excuse that I will come back if those relatives of my friend do not treat me well,” Dy Saveth says.

In Nice, she earned her living as a waitress, and also took on work as a nanny. She also founded the Khmer Culture Association in France.

In 1993, Dy Saveth came back to Cambodia, but did not resume her acting career right away.

In 2002, she was asked to play the mother in the film *Teuk Chet Mday* (Mother's Heart), a big hit directed by Poan Phoung Bopha. Since then, she was in more than ten movies, including *Nesat Krohper* (The Crocodile), directed by Mao Ayuth, and most recently in *Sneh Pre Roup* (A Change of Love).

Even though she is 67 now, she still gives private acting lessons in her own home and is often seen in karaoke videos. She is also frequently invited to be a judge in singing or acting contests, and is currently a jury member of the television show *Kagna Ek Bridgestone*, a beauty contest sponsored by the tyre company. When she has no other obligations, she loves to drive her car through Phnom Penh to look at the ever-changing city.

Looking back at her adventurous life, Dy Saveth says: “I think that I am the luckiest person who survived the Khmer Rouge regime. I almost cannot believe that all that has happened to me.”

Hong Chanpheaktra, Vorn Makara, Tet Chann



The Tricks of Ly Bun Yim

How the director created the low-tech special effects in his masterpiece “12 Sisters”



Fake Blood: Just mix leak (natural dye made out of plants) with sugar and eggs. Beat it until it develops a dense consistency.



Flying Pig: Lay tracks on the floor of your location and hide them with black paper. Mount the pig on wheels and push it – complete with Kong Sam Eun and Virak Dara on top of it – down the tracks.

Remove paper and tracks. Rewind film and shoot the same scene without the pig. You got yourself a flying swine.



Earthquake: Dig a hole that is four or five meters deep and approximately twice as long. Cover it with plywood that is tied to a long piece of rope and mounted on small wheels. Put soil on top of it, and grow some grass on it to make it look more natural. In order to create a realistic-looking earth quake, place the camera on the plywood piece and drag on the rope. The plank will move backwards, and the camera will film the abyss that opens up in front of the lens like a crater that forms during an earthquake.



Flying Horse: Start by building a ramp. Let the horse run up the ramp, but cover it with black paper. Once you are done shooting this, rewind the film, remove ramp including paper, and just shoot the background. Once you develop the film, it will appear as if the horse rides up into the sky.



Giant Face: For this trick, you need to build the wall of the palace including a door. Then mask the lens with black paper, leaving only an opening shaped like the door in the wall, and film the face of the “giant” framed by the paper. Rewind the film and point the camera to the wall. Make sure that the door is where the hole in the paper was before. Place actors in front of the wall. When you develop the film, it will appear as if the giant is peeking through the door at the actors. *Koam Tivea, Ly You Y, Lay Ratana*

Profile

Ly Bun Yim



Not everybody has a small Royal Palace on the top of his house. But then again, Ly Bun Yim is not everybody, but one of Cambodia’s most audacious directors. Born in Kampong Cham province on June 6, 1942, Ly Bun Yim taught himself how to make photographs, when he was a youth. In 1961, he produced his first film, *Rontear Kruosa* (Family Lighting) without any previous training and a team of amateurs.

Not only did he direct his debut, but he also wrote, shot, edited, and starred in the movie. With the technical expertise he gained during the shooting of this film, he managed to create with simple technical means special effects like giants and flying horses that left his audience speechless.

“During the 1960s, I outdid the other directors due to my special effects,” he says proudly. Most films he made were strongly supported by people not only in Phnom Penh, but also in the provinces.

Before the Khmer Rouge took over in Cambodia he made about 20 movies, most of which are lost today. Fortunately, three of his films, *Sobasith*, *Punthysen Neang Kongrey* (12 Sisters) and *Orn Euy Srey Orn* (Khmer After Angkor) survived in film laboratories in France and Hong Kong. In the 1960s, he also owned a cinema, Hemacheat, and a production company, Pich Pheap Yun, or Flash Diamond Production.

When the city was evacuated in 1975, Ly and his wife, actress Virak Dara, fled with their family to the Vietnamese border. They were interned for a few months in a camp in Laos. In December 1976, Mr. Ly and his family escaped to Paris, where he opened a restaurant. He went to the USA in 1984 and came back to Cambodia in 1994. *Tolaka Atitep* (Divinity Court), made in 2003, was his first film after his return.

Ly, now 68, still wants to make movies, hence the Royal Palace on the roof of his house. It’s the setting of his next film. *Koam Tivea*

Records of a terrible history

78 documentaries from the Pol Pot Regime still exist today



Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders at a party rally at Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium / Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center

When the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, it also meant the end of the previously thriving film industry of Cambodia. Many actors and directors fled the country or were murdered during the bloody dictatorship that lasted over four years.

Yet, the Khmer Rouge produced a small body of documentaries and propaganda movies. Through their alliance with China, the Khmer Rouge benefited from Chinese filmmaking and propaganda techniques. Khmer Rouge films were made with the help of Chinese film makers. "The Pol Pot regime was supported by China. The Chinese helped produce

these films for Pol Pot and taught Khmer Rouge members how to shoot the films. The Khmer Rouge leaders did nothing to produce the films," says Som Sokun, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

These crude propaganda films were occasionally screened at the meetings of rural work groups. They emphasized the effort necessary to develop Democratic Kampuchea, and showed primarily scenes of workers in the countryside and in the factories, people working in the rice fields, party meetings, and other political events. Films were also made during official visits either by other heads of state to Cambodia

or of Khmer Rouge leaders abroad. For the purpose of propaganda, the Khmer Rouge also filmed reenactments of their battles with the Lon Nol army and other military victories.

According to Lim Sophorn, research analyst at the Bophana Center, a media archive in Phnom Penh, most of these films are of poor quality, in black and white and without sound. The majority of them are short films. There are only two films that have certain aesthetic qualities. He quotes *Kon Khhosna knung Roborb Kampuchea RboCheatebtey* (Propaganda film for Democratic Kampuchea), produced in 1978 and shot in color and with sound,

as the most accomplished film. It shows the alleged achievement of the Khmer Rouge in agriculture, industry, fishing and infrastructure. We see people in the black pajamas of the Khmer Rouge rebuilding houses, bridges and railways that were destroyed by the civil war. The film shows the industrial methods in farming that the Khmer Rouge had adopted from Communist China. We also see children working in a factory, making spoons and pots. There are also shots that show the ideological schoolings that young people had to undergo. After their studies, they had to work on the farm work together with their elders. People were encouraged to laugh and sing during these screenings to express their support of the Pol Pot regime. This film was shown abroad to create the impression that the so-called Democratic Kampuchea was a peaceful agrarian state, while in reality the people of Cambodia were overworked, suffered from hunger and were subjected to arbitrary killings and other atrocities.

Kar Bromol phal Srov (The Rice Harvest) from 1977 shows how farmers cooperate during the rice harvest. The harvesters, tractors and other modern farming equipment are shown in the film. The film was meant as propaganda for the new ways of farming under the Khmer Rouge. It shows a large number of people sharing duties during the rice harvest: the cutting of the rice in the rice paddies, the husking of the rice and its packaging. We see how the farmers smile, when they eventually look at what they have harvested.

Kar Brochum Visamanh Robos Keanakpak Kumunish Ney Kampuchea (Extraordinary meeting of the Communist Party of Kampuchea), a black and white documentary without sound, was also produced in this era. The documentary shows the extraordinary gathering of members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea at Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium. Thousands of party supporters gathered in order to listen to speeches of high-ranking Khmer Rouge leaders such as Pol Pot, Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary. Apart from the speeches, there are dances and songs, performed by a group that carries spades, axes, sickles and guns. The songs and the dance choreography came from Angkar, or "Organisation", as the secretive Cambodian Communist Party called itself. They were meant to show



Forced labor under Khmer Rouge / Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center

how the citizens of Cambodia cooperated both during work and war.

After the Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown, many of these films were found in offices, private houses and even lying in the streets. "I myself collected all these films and kept them in the Cinema Department of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Art, because I know the real value of these films," says Mr. Som.

Because there were no facilities to adequately store the films, they deteriorated year by year. "Cambodia is hot, and we did not have the budget to keep the films in a proper archive. Every year, we threw away some of the films that had become unwatchable. Because we were afraid that all of them would be lost, we decided in 1997 to send the remaining 230 films to France to have them restored," says Mr. Som. These films included productions from the Khmer Rouge period as well as films by King Sihanouk, films from the colonial period and from the Lon Nol regime. "We wanted to have them transferred to digital to keep them for a long time. The films that were restored were sent back to Cambodia. However, some that were beyond repair were left in France," says Sin Chan Saya, the Director of the Department of Cinema.

The National Audio-Visual Institute (INA) and the Thomson Fund in Paris helped to restore and transfer these films

into digital format, a process that took four years. "They were able to restore 169 of these films, and they have been sent back to Cambodia, because they belong to the Cambodian people," says Som Sokun.

The Bophana Center today has the 78 films that were produced in Democratic Kampuchea. Gaetan Crespel, Archive Manager at Bophana, says that it has sent some of them to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal as evidence. "These films include material that could help make cases against such senior Khmer Rouge leaders as Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan. Equally important, these documents are crucial parts of the country's modern history of genocide and could serve as educational tools for future generations of Cambodians," says Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).

People can watch all the films from Democratic Kampuchea at Bophana Center, and all these films can be screened elsewhere, if the Department of Cinema grants permission.

Today at the Bophana Center, the propaganda films of the Khmer Rouge are among the most frequently watched films of the archive. They are valuable records of the Khmer Rouge period that can educate the young generation about the past and warn them not to repeat that terrible history. *Kim Samath, Tet Chann*



People standing outside Lux Cinema / Chum Vicheth

From Golden Age to Dark Age

The reasons for the decline of the Cambodian film industry

Min Sitha's office does not look like that of other film producers. In fact, it is not even a real office at all. We meet him for our interview at the faculty room of a school, a small, dark and stuffy room with only a few shelves full of files and a first aid kit for decoration. It is here, where Mr. Min teaches math as a day job. His second career, however, is writing film scripts and having them produced. His first finished project is the horror film *Proleung Mday Knhom Tamloang* (Haunted by My Mom's Spirit). He wrote the script, and paid a production company "between US\$10.000 and US\$20.000" to turn it into a movie.

While his colleagues go in and out

and prepare their teaching materials at the English Language Training Institute (ELT) in downtown Phnom Penh, the novice film maker talks about his career in the film business. He says that he likes his day job very much, and that he only makes movies in his free time. He is also aware that the film industry in Cambodia is in perpetual crisis, and that aspiring film makers do not tend to get very far with their career. However, he is determined to produce more films.

Min Sitha might be a particular case. But this part-time film producer can serve as a clue of how contemporary films are made in a country, where there are almost no film production companies and few

professional directors, cinematographers and other movie workers left.

Cambodia had a thriving film industry in the 1960s and 1970s, the "Golden Age of Khmer Cinema", before the Khmer Rouge put an end to everything they considered modern and alien to Khmer culture in 1975. Before that, Khmer productions could compete with foreign films both in terms of popularity and quality.

Today however, as more foreign films are available domestically, the audience does not support the local films as it used to do. Since production and attendance has dwindled, most of the once 30 cinemas in Phnom Penh were converted to hotels, restaurants or shops.

Chom Vichet, owner of the film production Abpi Monkul, who has directed *Proleung Mday Knhom Tamloang* (Haunted by My Mom's Spirit) based on Min Sitha's script, knows that the situation of the film industry is dire. He is aware that local films today are not as successful as those in the past. "There are a lot of things that challenge us in movie production," he says. To him, the most important reason for the low quality of contemporary films is low budgets: "In other countries, they spend a fortune on their films, and Khmer directors cannot compete with these kinds of budgets. Normally, Khmer directors spend around US\$30.000 for one film, while foreign film production companies can spend more than one million dollar. With this kind of money, we would be able to make 30 films in Cambodia, so the quality must undoubtedly be different."

The second problem that Khmer directors face is the lack of modern technical equipment, such as cameras and post-production facilities, which makes the production of quality movies difficult, as it is not only the skilfulness of the film director, but also technical conditions, that contribute to the production of good movies.

"I use a camera that costs only US\$10.000, but in more advanced countries film directors use cameras that cost almost US\$100.000, which produce much better images," he explains.

Another challenge is the lack of professional staff that is experienced in film production, Mr. Chom argues. To resolve this problem and to support the Cambodian film industry, he thinks that the government should establish a film school to train future filmmakers.

To Yvon Hem, one of the most famous directors of the 1960s and the former owner of Bak Sey Tansaur production, who made the first Cambodian movie after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, there are more reasons, why the Cambodian film industry is ailing: "First of all, there are all these new entertainment technologies. Almost every household in the cities of Cambodia has a television, cable TV, radio and internet. Even in the countryside, almost all the houses have television and radio. Therefore they prefer watching foreign films at home on TV rather than going to the cinema," he says, adding that many people in Cambodia do not want to spend money on movie tickets.

Another reason for the downfall of the local film industry are pirated DVDs, according to Mr. Hem, as people are not prepared to pay a lot of money for movies and the film producers have no financial incentive to make new movies anymore.

Fay Sam Ang, another contemporary filmmaker, who has directed some of the most successful Cambodian movies in the last two decades, feels that the low quality of local films is the main reason for their



Still from "Haunted by My Mum's Spirit" / Chum Vicheth

Profile

Lim Keav



Lim Keav, 68, has painted hundreds of film posters for cinemas in Phnom Penh. He learned painting in 1961, and started his own shop Kok Tep Art in 1966. He painted marquees for cinemas such as Soriya, Phnom Pich, Sor Prum Meas, and Hem Cheat.

When the Khmer Rouge regime took over, film productions came to a halt in 1975, and he had to stop painting. Fourteen years later, people started to make movies again, and he started to paint film posters again in the late 80s.

Asked how many film marquees he has painted, he says, he cannot count them anymore.

He was forced to stop painting film posters at the end of 2003, because the first big digital printing machines arrived in Cambodia, and from then on no more film posters were painted.

He has no students: "No one wants to learn this any more, because it is tough work. It is hard to paint a realistic likeness of a person's face."

Since then, he paints photos that foreigners send to him from abroad and the Angkor Wat temple to sell to tourists. Among his most famous local customers were Hy Bunheang, chief of the prime minister's bodyguards, and Hun Sen himself, whom he painted in his uniform in 1990.

As he gets older, Lim Keav says that he cannot paint small pictures anymore because of his poor eyes. However, he is still self-confident, and says: "I can paint anything that clients ask me to paint." *Ly You Y*



Min Sitha / Archive



Chum Vicheth / Archive



Svay Socheata / Suy Heimkhemra

lack of success: “The decline of the film industry began in 1993, because most of the local films were poorly made.” At that time, nearly every local TV channel began to show Thai movies, which influenced the taste of the Cambodians. A lot of people both in the cities and in the countryside became big fans of Thai films.

In January 2003, a Cambodian newspaper article falsely alleged that Thai actress Suvanant Kongying had claimed that Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand. As a reaction, riots broke out in Phnom Penh, leading to the violent destruction of the Thai embassy in Cambodia and many Thai-owned businesses. The Cambodian

government prohibited Thai movies to be shown in Cambodia. Nevertheless, Cambodian people still did not want to watch Khmer films because of their low quality, but turned to Hong Kong action movies, Fay Sam Ang says. “Until today, our people still prefer Chinese movies and increasingly Korean films.”

Svay Socheata, a movie actress and former movie director and film producer, says that Cambodian films have been improving, but they were not good enough to be compared with the films of the past. In the “Golden Age of Khmer cinema”, local films were supported by the audiences, and often earned a lot of money.

She herself has produced three movies. The first movie, *Cheim Anata* (The Last Blood), was successful and earned a lot of money. Her second film was not as successful as the first one, and did not make a big profit. Finally, her third and last movie, *Morhet Tirith Sork Kondanh* (The Power of Curly Hair) was a flop, and she lost a lot of money. Therefore, she decided to stop producing films.

Ms. Svay said that the reason for the decline of the Cambodian film industry is lack of professionalism: “In our country, we don’t have a film school, so we are lacking both professional directors and actors,” she says. “I hope that we will have a professional institute to teach people sometime in the future.”

In the lobby of Cine Lux, one of the two remaining cinema houses in Phnom Penh, a handful of people are sitting despite the heat of over 40 degree Celsius. Lark Sovannara, a student at Santhor Mouk High School, says: “Khmer movies have a lot of weaknesses, especially when it comes to the actors and actresses. They perform awfully, and they are not as good as in foreign films. They don’t speak in a natural way. It seems like they are trying to remember their lines.”

Pov Thida, a university student and movie fan, who also waits in the Lux Cinema, says that she comes here twice a month, always with her classmates and friends. “To be honest, my friends and I mostly go to the movies, because we want to meet each other or have chance to be with our boyfriends,” she says.



Cast of “Stop Shooting Ghost Film” directed by Chum Vicheth / Chum Vicheth

Sin Chan Saya, director of the Department of Cinema, recalls that two decades ago, there were a lot of Cambodian films. He explains that between 1989 and 1991, there were around 200 film production companies that made approximately 300 movies, most of them cheap productions, shot on analogue video. The sudden spike in production led to an over-saturation of the market, and after 1991, not many movies were made in Cambodia.

“Cambodia produced only a few movies between 1992 and 2000,” he says, adding that there was another brief spike in productions at the beginning of this decade. However, most of these films were not successful. One of the few hits was *Sdach Domrey Sor* (King of White Elephants) by Korm Chanthly.

The biggest star of that period was Piseth Pilika, a beautiful and famous Cambodian ballet dancer and actress, who appeared in many movies and karaoke videos. Her career was brought to a premature end, when she was shot on July 6, 1999, while she was shopping at the Orussey Market in Phnom Penh. Her funeral was attended by thousands of mourners. The loss of one of its biggest stars also played its part in the decline of the Cambodian film industry.

However, there were some films that did well in the last decade. Mao Ayuth’s *Nesath Kroper* (The Crocodile) from 2006 became a box office success because it featured Preap Sovath, a famous singer. *Knhom Chea Neak Na* (Who am I?) also

did well, because it was produced by famous director Poan Phoung Bopha. (Read her profile on page 22). Another success was *Tum Teav* (Tum and Teav), directed by Fay Sam Ang. Nevertheless, in the last couple of years, the number of film productions has been in steady decline: In 2007, there were 35 movies, in 2008, 25, and in 2009, 13 movies. This year, so far six movies were produced, two of them by math-teacher-turned-film-producer Min Sitha.

“Even though our film production is faltering, I am trying my best to improve the situation of local cinema,” he says. He has not made any profit with his first film, but he also did not lose money. Now he hopes to sell his film abroad. And he has finished a new film: *Sronos Khleum Chan* (Miss Sandalwood), directed by Sok Sothon.

He is now working on a third production, which is entitled *Vinhean Aditakal* (Ghost from the Past). It is a family movie, but also features a ghost.

“Before I start to shoot any particular film, I observe what kind of film people like, so that my movie is more likely to be a success,” Min Sitha explains.

He adds: “I make films for my audiences to watch so I have to make movies that are popular. I am a teacher, so my films should have some educational value. Therefore, I try to include enlightening elements even into my ghost films.” *Suy Heimkhemra*, *Khut Sornnimul*, *Noy Kimhong*



Behind the scenes of “Haunted by My Mom’s Spirit” / Chum Vicheth

Profile

Rithy Panh



Rithy Panh is one of the best known Cambodian film makers who has focused on the Khmer Rouge period in his films. So far, he has made over ten documentary films that are well-known both locally and internationally including *S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing machine*, which was screened at many festivals around the world.

He also made four fiction films. Rithy Panh’s films deal with the aftermath of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. In his film *Rice People*, he introduces a rural Khmer family struggling with life in the post-Khmer Rouge period. His other films include *One Evening after the War* and *The Sea Wall*, based on a novel by French writer Marguerite Duras that is set in the Cambodian city of Kampot.

Born in 1964, he is a victim of the Khmer Rouge regime himself as his father, mother, sisters and nephews died at that time. That’s why he wants the world to know, how the war damaged the people and the country.

Rithy Panh fled to France in 1980, where he graduated in cinematography from the French National Cinema School. He became interested in filmmaking when he was handed a video camera during a party, while he was attending vocational school in France to learn carpentry.

Rithy Panh returned to Cambodia again in 1990 after eleven years in exile. Today, he is living between these two countries, using France as his home base and Cambodia as the subject of his movies.

He is the head of Bophana, the Audio Visual Center of Cambodia, which aims to preserve the country’s film history. *Dara Saoyuth*

Movies with a message

Poan Phoung Bopha is Cambodia's most successful woman film maker

Poan Phoung Bopha is busy, always busy. When we meet her in her studio, she is sitting in front of a computer, and works with her editor on her new television series.

She takes us to her office for an interview, even though she does not really have the time. "Reading is my passion. As a result, I am what I am today," she shares with us, once we sit down.

Poan Phoung Bopha, journalist, novelist, scriptwriter, radio producer, film director, is the most successful woman film director in Cambodia today. In her movies, she has frequently addressed social relevant topics and controversial subjects. Yet, some of her films, such as *Toek Chet*

Mday (Mother's Heart), *Toek Chet Oa Puk* (Father's Heart) and *Knhom Chea Nak Na* (Who am I?), are among the most successful Cambodian movies of the last decade.

She was born in 1955 in the Chantrea district of Svay Rieng Province. She grew up in a middle class family. Her father was a teacher, her mother a house wife. She has seven siblings, five boys and two girls. She was the eldest child in the family, which made her responsible for her younger siblings.

Despite her many responsibilities, she never ceased to read. Whenever there was any free time available, she grabbed a book, no matter where she was. "I like reading books a lot. I read in the kitchen,

in the bed room or even in the toilet," she says, adding that every night she used to read books with her father. Much of what they read would later serve as an inspiration for her novels and films.

She was an outstanding student in Khmer literature. "My essay were always the best. Teachers always took my essay as the model for the other students," Bopha remembers.

Although successful in school, she was not able to go to the university, as her family could not afford it. "My family was too poor. My father was a teacher, and had a lot of children. And my mother was sick," she explains. Later on, she got the opportunity to go for workshops abroad, to



Poan Phoung Bopha is directing her TV series "La Bech Srey"

countries like the USA, England, Germany, Australia and Russia. Even though she never studied at the university, she found it easy to understand what speakers there were trying to say due to her extensive reading.

In 1970, she married Phout Chan Rasmey. However, he, her father and her younger brother were killed during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. In 1983, she married Touch Bun Choun. They have two children, son Touch Phoung Virak and daughter Touch Phoung Nimul.

Her second husband, who used to work for National Television (TVK), was the main influence that made her become a successful film director. "My husband always brought documents on how to film home, so I always looked at them, and sometimes I went with my husband to the location to see how they shot," said Bopha. She also attended workshops on film production.

In 1989, she and her friends agreed to create a film production called Phnom Pich Film Production. The production made only one film called, *Kos Prous Havey* (Why Were Those Mistakes Committed?).

In the 1990s, she founded her own film production called Sayan Dara. She produced eleven films, such as *Bong Nov*

Te Sne (I Still Love You) and others.

In 1993, she decided to stop making film for a while. Instead, she went to work as a journalist at *Pro Chea Chon* (People's Newspaper) and later on she got a job at *Raksmey Kampuchea* newspaper. Her main reason to work as a journalist for a newspaper was her suffering under the Pol Pot regime. "As a a journalist, I can write about whatever I want to write, while I was not allowed to do that under Pol Pot," she says.

Her reading experiences and good memory made her one of the best and successful writers in that newspaper, even though she never attended journalism classes. "Every three months, there was a competition to rate reporters," she said. She was put into group A, the best group, with three other journalists.

In 1998, Bopha left journalism in order to join the Woman Media Center (WMC) as a co-director. Over there, she gained a great deal of experience in producing public service messages, which were mostly about education, gender and women.

However, as she likes to challenge herself, she will not stick to one job for the rest of her life. In 2004 she started to work for the Cambodian Television Network (CTN), where she has stayed ever since.



Poan Phoung Bopha during the interview / Dara Saoyuth

So far, she has produced more than twenty television series for CTN, including *Pagna Ka Ek* (Parasite) and *Bes Dong Rong Krouns* (Broken Heart), which deal with everyday life in Cambodia.

Besides working for CTN, Bopha has also produced a number of feature films, including *Btey La Or* (Good Husband) and *Teuk Cheot Ov Puk* (Father's Heart). Her film *Teuk Chet Mday* (Mother's Heart) was so touching that audiences cried their eyes out during the screenings.

"I am so happy with this film because I spent very little money on it, but it was very influential. It reminded many people to treat their parents with respect," she says. In 2008, one of her films, *Teuk Chet Krou Bongrean* (Teacher's Heart), was awarded the bronze trophy by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts during the third National Khmer Film Festival in Phnom Penh.

Who am I? is another film that she has made. So far it was her most controversial film, as it tackles the topic of lesbian love. Two young women get separated by their parents, because they cannot accept the idea that a woman loves a woman. The lovers try their best to explain their relationship to their parents, but they do not listen to them.

The story clearly depicts the discrimination against lesbian love. Bopha wants to challenge the prejudice against lesbian love as unacceptable and unnatural.

"Those parents in the movie have to find a balance between life and death. If they decide to separate the two, it is more likely that their children will commit suicide to demonstrate their true love," says Bopha. *Veng Rachana*, *Khut Sornnimul* *Tang Khyhay*



Dy Saveth on her death bed in "Mother's Heart"

Made in Cambodia

Six films that were shot here

Matt Dillon: City of Ghost (2002)



Gangster Jimmy must come to Cambodia to collect his share in money. The shooting locations in Cambodia include Phnom Penh, the old French Police head quarter, pictured above in the background, Battambang, Kep, Udong, Phnom Chisor, and Bokor Hill Station.

Simon West: Lara Croft - Tomb Raider (2001)



About one third of the movie was shot in Siem Reap province. The story is based on a computer game with heroine Lara Croft who comes to find one half of the “Triangle of Light” in Cambodia and another half in Russia. The shooting locations in Cambodia include Ta Prom temple, Angkor Wat temple, Bayon temple, and the waterfall at Phnom Koulen Mountain.

Detlev Buck: Same Same but Different (2010)



The love story between a German backpacker and a Cambodian bargirl includes shots of the historic “White Building” from the 1960s in Tonle Bassac, a disco scene filmed in an abandoned colonial villa opposite the National Museum, and numerous scenes shot in guest houses on the Boeung Kak Lake that is currently being filled with sand.

Richard Brooks: Lord Jim (1965)



Young English merchant seaman Jim is offered an extremely dangerous job – transporting gunpowder and rifles by river to Partusan. Based on Joseph Conrad’s novel, the film is shot in different locations: Shepperton, Great Britain, Lantau Island, Hong Kong, Malacca, Malaysia, and Angkor Wat temple, Cambodia.

Marcel Camus: Bird of Paradise (1962)



The film is about the ill-fated love affair between an itinerant worker and a temple dancer. Some of the actors, such as Saksi Sbond, went on to become popular stars, and Yvon Hem, who worked as an errand boy for the production, became one of the most accomplished directors in Cambodia. The shooting locations include the area around Siem Reap, Phnom Penh and Angkor Wat.

Wong Kar-wai: In the Mood for Love (2001)



The story is about the love of two people (Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-zhen) who found out that their spouses had another love affair while working outside. Because of guilt, they decide not to live together and finally split up for different living. The final scene was shot in Siem Reap province, Cambodia, where the main actor visits Angkor Wat temple.

The first gay movie in Cambodia

“High School Love’s Story” wants to paint a realistic picture of the situation of homosexuals in Cambodia

High School Love’s Story, produced by the Ratanak Mohasal Production, is a historic first in Khmer cinema: it is the first film about the life of gay couples who are discriminated not only in Cambodia, but also in many other countries in the world.

The movie features a love triangle that involves Norea (Sovan Norea), a poor high school student and orphan, and Sheila (Kim Dara), Norea’s best friend. Norea is the boyfriend of Thida (Nalang), and since Haki (Chea Vannarith), the high school bully, is also in love with her, he often gets Norea in trouble. Sheila helps Norea whenever he is in trouble, until the friendship develops into a love relationship.

Kao Seiha, the director and producer of the film, said that High School Love’s Story is meant to mirror what is really happening in Cambodian society. “I want to give the audience a better understanding of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men),” he points out. “I will also talk about the situation of the spoilt youth in Cambodia. And I want to raise the awareness for HIV/Aids transmission,” he explains.

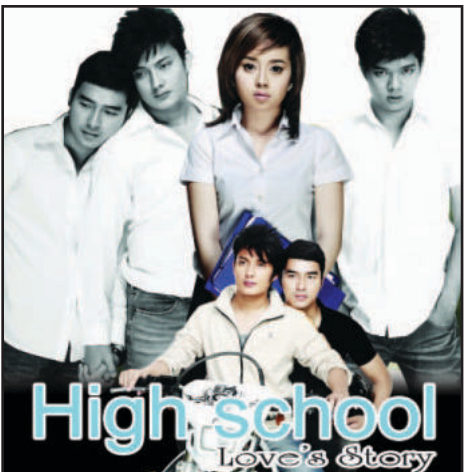
Kao, who is also the editor-in-chief of Mysterious Magazine, has written and directed the film. It was shot by Chea

Chim, one of the most accomplished cinematographers in Cambodia.

Like *Who am I?*, a story of lesbian love directed by Paon Phoung Bopha, *High School Love’s Story* is expected to receive negative reactions from the audience due to the anti-gay attitude in the Cambodian society. Nevertheless, the director of the movie stresses that he did not produce his movie with the goal to encourage more people to try out homosexuality, but to paint a realistic picture of the situation of homosexuals in Cambodia, so that gay people can live their life without discrimination.

Since this movie is Mr. Kao’s debut as a director, he faced a lot of difficulties during the production. Firstly, he had to postpone the shooting a few times, even though he wanted to finish the movie in May 2010, because the Ministry of Culture wanted to review the script before allowing the shooting to begin. The selection of actors was a particular difficult process. Some male actors rejected the roles because they were afraid that other people would think that they were really gay. Eventually, however, he found the best and most suitable actors in Chea Sovan Norea and Chea Vannarith.

Says Norea: “I don’t care what people think about my sexual orientation, as this



Poster of “High School Love’s Story”

film is a work of fiction. However, I also don’t think loving a member of the same sex is something to be ashamed of.”

No matter whether his first film will be a success or not, Kao’s Ratanak Mohasal Production, will produce two more movies that will also deal with the situation of young people in Cambodia.

“I have to pay as much attention as I can to this film, not just because it is my first film, but also because I want this movie to compete during the International Film Festival in October, so I have to work hard for it,” Mr. Kao said. *Lang Mesa*



Main Characters: Nalang, Norea, and Dara



Opening Ceremony of Filming



Shooting Process at 2am

International Film Festival

The Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts will have its first international film festival from October 20th to 23rd in 2010. The goal of the festival is to promote the country's developing film industry and Cambodian culture. It also aims to attract foreign filmmakers and movie stars to shoot movies in Cambodia, says Som Sokun, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

Sin Chan Saya, director of the Film Department, says that the main purpose of the event is to exchange experiences with foreign directors and other movie workers who will participate in the film festival. He hopes, that not only will international filmmakers screen their latest movies in the country, but also share their skills with Khmer directors.

The Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF) is hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, endorsed by UNESCO and organized by FX Entertainment in association with the Cambodia Film Commission, Kmy Films and the Association of Filmmakers of Cambodia.

During the event, there will

be both theatre screenings and outdoor screenings. Awards will be given out during the closing ceremony. There will be an exposition called "Cinema Industry Showcase", and workshops and seminars. The organizers of the event will also show successful independent films from around the world, classic and modern Khmer films, international award-winning documentaries, youth-oriented films, as well as local TV series and music videos.

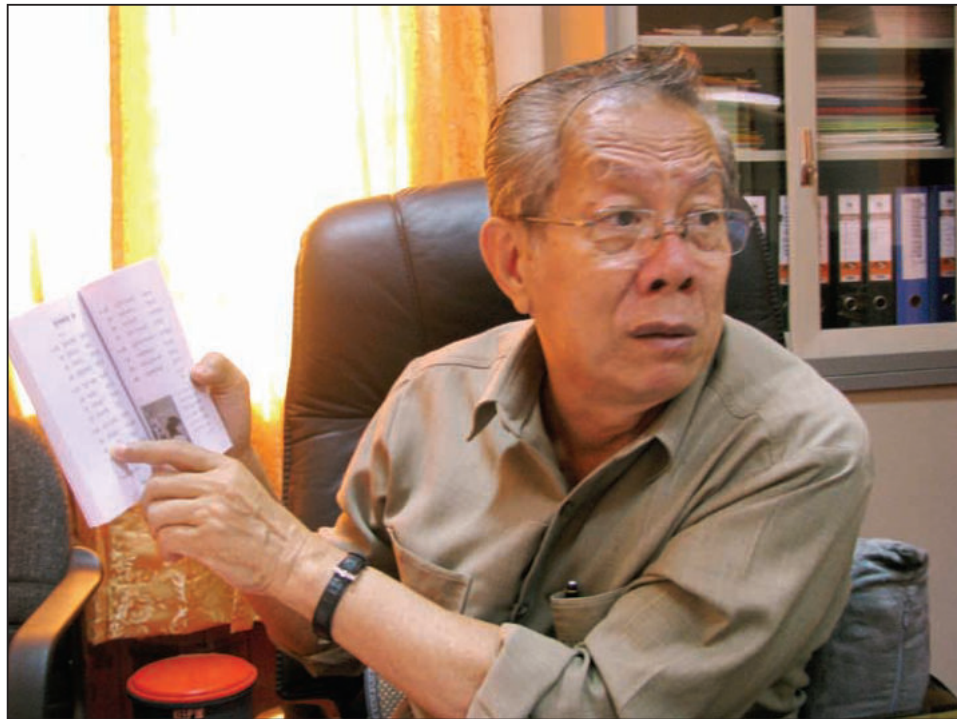
Previously, the Cambodia National Film Festival took place three times at the Chatomok Theatre. The first national event was held in 1990, the second one was in 2005, and the last one was held in 2007, says Mr. Sin Chan Saya, the head of the film department. Before the Khmer Rouge regime, in the late 1960s, Cambodia had an international film festival that was hosted by King Sihanouk. *Mak Kuleka*



Film Award

5 Tips from Mao Ayuth

How to make a good film



Mao Ayuth shows his book of poetry / Lang Mesa

Born in 1944 in Kompong Cham province, Mao Ayuth is currently the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Information as well as a film director and script writer. His last movie, *The Crocodile*, was so successful that it received six trophies during the Cambodian Film Festival in 2006. Mao Ayuth is sharing his insight on how to make a successful film.

1. Be original!

Most current Cambodian filmmakers tend to copy the stories of foreign films, and most of them are ghost movies. This makes their films quite repetitive and boring. My movie, *The Crocodile* for example, was very successful due to its originality. It is not hard to find story ideas like that. I have seen people catching crocodiles and how people were saved after crocodile attacks. Therefore, I used those stories for my *Crocodile* movie.

2. Do your research!

To be able to write a good script, it is crucial to do research. For instance, when I began writing my up-coming film for Hang Meas, *Sdach Korn*, I did research in

history books and sculptures on temples because I need to know historic details and the way people dressed.

3. Produce a meaningful script!

The script should be realistic. The script that has too many stilted dialogues makes the audience feel bored. A good script includes all aspects of life: funny, dramatic, and educational.

4. Study!

It is important to have professional training in directing and filming. A good film maker should watch other Khmer and foreign movies and learn from those filmmakers.

5. Pay attention to the sound!

It is great to use natural voices of the actors, but if you have to use dub, make sure the dub is in sync with the lip movement of the actors. Be careful with the intonation. Either use natural voice or dub so that the conversation is not so flat. Also pay attention to the music.

Good voice and a good score make the audience concentrate on the movie even more. *Lang Mesa*, *Ngo Menghourng*, *Sun Mesa*

10 Khmer films you should know



Advertisement of "Ne Sat Kror Per"

Mao Ayuth: Ne Sat Kror Per
(*The Crocodile*, 2005)

San (Nhem Sokunthol) has lost his wife, relatives, neighbors, best friend and almost his own life to crocodiles. He is determined to sacrifice everything to kill *Kror Per Nak Ta* (the crocodile king). One of the few quality films with an appropriate budget in the last decade.

Poan Phoung Bopha: Tek Chet Mday
(*Mother's Heart*, 2005)

A mother of four children tries hard to provide them with education. When they grow up, they neglect her, and she dies of sorrow. A melodrama that many parents could relate to.

Dy Saveth: Thida Sork Pous
(*The Snake Girl*, 1972)

After an affair with a snake, a woman gives birth to a daughter that has snakes on her head instead of hair. Ah Mei (Dy Saveth) grows up and meets Fei Long (Kong Sam Oeun). He falls in love with her, however his mother wants him to marry his stepfather's daughter, Mila. The films climaxes in a killing ceremony, when droves of snakes attack and kill off most of the family.

Yvon Hem: Srur Morl Anthakal
(*Shadow of Darkness*, 1987)

The family tragedy set during the Khmer Rouge period and directed by veteran director Yvon Hem was the first local production after 1979: A whole

family gets wiped out, because their son Visal has dared to secretly cook rice. Only Visal manages to escape to Vietnam.

Lay Ngounheng: Tep Sodachan
(*Tep Sodachan*, 1968)

Ange Tep Sodachan (Tit Vichara Dany) falls in love with mortal Veasna (Kong Sam Oeun), the poor servant of a rich and cruel man. She comes to earth to live with Veasna, but as she is very beautiful, his evil master tries to get her. The lovers escape, but now Sodachan's father is after them, too. Sodachan delivers a baby before she has to go back to heaven. One of the most popular films from the "Golden Age of Khmer Cinema".

Tea Lim Koun: Pous Keng Korng
(*Snake King's Wife*, 1960s)

Nhi encounters a big snake when she and her daughter are searching for food. The snake promises to help them if Nhi agrees to make love with her. Nhi gets pregnant. When her husband discovers this, he plans to kill the snake king. He also attacks his wife, who, while dying, gives birth to several little snakes. Based on a Cambodian fairy tale, this film was remade in 2001 by Fay Sam Ang because of its popularity.

King Norodom Sihanouk: Rous Dory Sabbay
(*Joy of Life*, 1968)

The police raids a gambling place, disguised as an orchid shop in Kirirom, owned by Prince Chantovong. While the prince is in prison, his wife, Princess Sulpra (Saksi Sbhong), has affairs with her



Sak Sisbourng and Kong Sam Oeun in "Joy of Life"

nephew (Kong Sam Oeun) and then with hotelier Okhnia Snea Sambat. After being released from prison, Prince Chantavong tries to get his wife back. King Sihanouk delivers a biting satire of his own environment, the Royal Palace with its intrigues and affairs. The campy films shows a modern and westernized Cambodia, and has a dance scene that has to be seen to be believed.

Fay Samang: Tum Teav
(*Tum Teav*, 2003)

The Cambodian Romeo and Juliet about the impossible love between a monk and a girl has been turned into a film a couple of times. This high-budget production budget is by one of Cambodia's most famous directors.



Teav is about to meet Tum

Ly BunYim: Puthisen Neang Korngrey
(*12 Sisters*, 1968)

Apoor farmer couple abandons their twelve daughters in the forest, where the king meets them and marries all of them. Instigated by his thirteenth wife, he blinds all of them and throws them in a cave, where they bear his children. Over-the-top fantasy film by Cambodia's most eccentric director.

Rithy Panh: Yob Mouy Kroy Sangkream
(*One Evening After the War*, 1997)

Cambodian-French arthouse director Rithy Panh tells the story of ex-soldier Savannah, who tries to eek out a meager existence in Phnom Penh after his discharge from the army during the administration of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).



Department of Media and Communication
Royal University of Phnom Penh
Russian Blvd., Phnom Penh
Tel.: (855) 23 884 408
E-mail: dmc@dmc-cci.edu.kh
Website: www.dmc-cci.edu.kh