

Em Theay

## Beyond the Killing Fields

*Everything was completely  
destroyed, only the Buddha  
was still sitting there.*

*We made a stop at  
Battambang City to search  
for our loved ones.*

*And at this village, I taught  
dance at a school which had  
recently opened.*

*It was one month old. On the  
way back to Phnom Penh,  
everywhere I stopped, I would  
teach classical dances and  
songs.*

Em Theay was one of the collaborators and performers in TheatreWorks' performance and video *The Continuum beyond the Killing Field* conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen, with music composed by Yen and video by Norlina Mohd. In keeping with the documentary aspects of this production, TheatreWorks from Singapore presented the translation in a personal script for each member of the audience. The text of this article is taken from the performance with kind permission of the author.

### **RICE FIELDS**

Everyday I go to work in the rice fields and during the breaks, I am asked to show them some classical court dancing. One morning, they asked me "Why does the Royal Court Dance have to be performed with two hands moving around and one leg up? So, show us Granny!" When I finished, they asked me why there is a word to attract men in the Royal Court Song. I replied, "to attract men does not mean to attract you as a man, but it is to attract the world to look at your performances!" After that I was forced to show different dances every day.

One day, while I was dancing, a man from the hospital came to tell me that my son had died in hospital. I was very shocked, but too terrified to say anything or to show my tears. This was because my crying could lead to the Pol Pot guards killing me. But I decided to ask for permission to see his body. The permission was not granted. Instead they told me not to worry about my son, as it is the country's responsibility to worry about him. That evening, when I finished work and was walking home, I stopped at the hospital to look for my son's body. The hospital told me that they had already buried him.

I continued with my routine work. Not long after, I was informed that my daughter had died in the hospital. This time, I hurriedly begged the officers to allow me to bury my daughter. They rejected my plea, and said that if I went, I would be punished. When I heard this, I fainted. I don't know how long I was unconscious but when I woke up, it



Em Theay in *The Continuum beyond the Killing Fields*. Photo: TheatreWorks of Singapore

was already sunset and the others had started to walk home; so I got up and walked after them.

That night, my family got together and talked about the deaths of my son and my daughter. The next morning, I had a very bad fever. So I went to the officer to ask for a day

off, but she replied that I was being lazy. That morning, while I was harvesting the rice, I fainted again. When I woke up, I found myself in the hospital. I had a few days of rest, but on the fourth day, my officers came to tell me to pack my clothes because I was on the list to go and clear the forests. It was my good fortune that the chief of my group walked in and suggested that I be sent to care for the children. I never saw the people who were sent to clear forests again.

Back in the children's community, I sang the Buddha song. I sing for my own children to go to heaven and for all the children in the community to know only peace and not starvation. This song also touched the chief of the children's community and, as a result, he ordered me to sing different songs every day. Hundreds of children would come to listen to me everyday.

#### THE FIRST DANCE

*A pair of doves, chatting on a branch of a tree  
Kukroo Kukroo Kukroo!  
Looking at the flocks of pelicans  
and herons flying hurriedly  
And biting each other  
While perching on the branch of the tree  
Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi...*

*Both small and big tigers are playing together  
On a mountain  
Vim Voom Vim Voom!  
Looking at the monkeys  
Looking for fruit  
Picked some of them and played with them  
Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi Noi...*

*Jackals are putting their heads outside  
Walking out and looking for food  
Chrut Chroo Chrut Chroo!  
Scaring away all the insects running hurriedly  
Including all kinds of birds and  
Both small and big lizards  
Aova Tokkei Tokkei*

### THE SONGBOOKS

On the day of the evacuation, I had just come back from the palace. I had my song-book, my dance-book and my costume. I always carry them in one bag, especially when I perform. When I was evacuated, I only took this bag with me, and not much else. At the labour camp, I had to find different ways of hiding the books from the spies or else I would have been killed. Today I still have those books.

### THE FAMILY

My husband was a royalist soldier. We fell in love with each other and after six months marriage, I became pregnant. The queen mother said, "If I had known you were in such a hurry to get pregnant I would not have allowed you to get married".

My daughter called Preab (Ann Thong Ki) tells: "Most of the classical dancers have a great expectation of me taking over all my mother's roles including her feelings. When I was growing up I was closer to my father than to my mother. I spent most of my time with him as my mother was always training and performing. Sometimes there is jealousy amongst the dancers because I am Em Theay's daughter. I tell myself that I have my own goals, dancing is what I love. I would go towards that goal whether I am Em Theay's daughter or not."

I still think my daughter has a long way to go. Whenever I see her dance I still feel like slapping and pinching her.

### THE RETURN

One day we woke up just to find that all Pol Pot officers had disappeared. There was a lot of confusion in my village. We started our

escape barefoot. Along the way we witnessed many battles between Pol Pot soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers.

I remember a bombed out pagoda. Everything was completely destroyed, only the Buddha was still sitting there. We made a stop at Battambang City to search for our loved ones. And at this village, I taught dance at a school which had recently opened. It was one month old. On the way back to Phnom Penh, everywhere I stopped, I would teach classical dances and songs.

The Ministry of Culture found out that I was still alive. They came to ask me to teach again. There were about 300 students all together. At first we all got paid with a rice allowance.

Today I am retired, but still teach classical dances and songs to the new generations. I love my art and I would do everything, anything, for the life of my performing art. It is the soul of our nation.

EM THEAY (Cambodia) is one of the leading exponents of classical dance and song in Cambodia. She started training when she was a child and became famous in her country, but, like many other artists, she suffered greatly under Pol Pot's regime. Miraculously she survived the Killing Fields, although she lost many family members and colleagues, and she continues to perform and teach in retirement. Em Theay was given a special award at *Changing She-Images*, a festival of women's performance held in Manila in 2002 and organised by the Philippines Educational Theatre Association.