

**WANDERING SOULS – PRESS KIT**

**A universal story of Cambodian courage, survival and the healing power of the arts**

**Directed by:** Aviva Ziegler

**Produced by:**  Margaret Murphy & Aviva Ziegler

**Edited by:** Andrew Arestides, ASE

**Country:** Australia

**Duration:** 74 Mins 30 Secs

**SHORT SYNOPSIS:**

Over nearly two years, this feature length documentary, **Wandering Souls** follows the mounting of a new stage production, *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia****,*** culminating in its premiere international performance in Melbourne.

Commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts, the *Requiem* is a first-time collaboration between filmmaker Rithy Panh and composer Dr. Him Sophy, **i**n memory of nearly 2 million Cambodians who died during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Alongside the staging of the production, this film tells first-hand survival stories of those involved in the creation of this major work and of the powerful will of Cambodians to reclaim an artistic heritage that disappeared during the four years of Pol Pot terror.

With a libretto based on *Bangsokol,* the Khmer Buddhist ritual that brings peace to the dead, Him Sophy’s score is a unique combination of traditional Khmer instruments and vocalists, together with Western chamber music and chorus.

Projected throughout the performance onto screens at the back of the stage, is a large triptych created by Rithy Panh. Using archival footage and elements from his personal films, Rithy has created a visual complement to the *Requiem,* adding to the emotive story of Cambodia’s recent past.

**Wandering Souls** follows an international team who work tirelessly with the Cambodian creators and musicians, to pull the stage production together. Our documentary captures them in Cambodia, Taiwan and Australia as the nerve-wracking deadline for their world premiere performance draws closer.

 

**POINTS OF INTEREST**

* **Wandering Souls,** the documentary premiered March 2019 at the Cambodian International Film Festival. In October 2019 the film was invited to screen in competition at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York.
* **2019 marked 40 years** since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia. when nearly 2 million people died.
* **Cambodian Living Arts** - Founded in 1998 by genocide survivor and musician Arn Chorn-Pond. CLA focuses on the revival of Cambodia’s endangered performing art forms and rituals. In 4 years under the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia lost 90% of its artists.
* **CLA commissioned the stage production** “Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia” as part of their mission, *“to be a catalyst in a vibrant arts sector, inspiring new generations”*.
* **November 2019** The stage production was performed in Cambodia during the Arts4peace Festival, for the first time.
* Internationally renowned filmmaker, **Rithy Panh,** designed all the visual content of the stage production. His film *The Missing Picture* was nominated for an Academy Award and won Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013. Recently he worked as a producer on Angelina Jollie’s film, *First They Killed My Father.*

**THE AUSTRALIAN CONNECTION**

* The world premiere of the stage performance took place in the Hamer Hall, Melbourne, before touring to New York’s Brooklyn Academy of Music, Boston and Paris.
* **Gideon Obarzanek** - world-renowned Australian director and choreographer, was the Director of Staging and is one of the lead characters in our documentary.
* **Melbourne’s Cambodian community** came to the Hamer Hall performances and many participated in the staging of the Requiem and engaged with the Cambodian performers and creative team while they were in Melbourne.



**LONG SYNOPSIS**

Between 1975 and 1979 an entire generation of Cambodian artists and intellectuals were decimated by the Khmer Rouge regime. In the years since, a growing community has emerged, bringing new expression to a culture still devastated by those unimaginable events.

A new stage production, ***Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia,*** began its world tour in Australia in October 2017. The unique fusion of music, voice, movement and stunning projected images, was created to honour the two million Cambodians who died at the hands of Pol Pot and to celebrate the renaissance of an artistic life that disappeared less than forty years ago.

This documentary, over nearly two years, charts the staging of the Requiem, interweaving heart-wrenching first person accounts of survival of those involved in the production. We learn of starvation and suffering; how in order to survive, musicians, cooked and ate the leather covering their drums; how many experienced unspeakable hardships and witnessed the deaths of family and friends but how nevertheless, many came through it all to lead rich, rewarding, artistic lives.

The two principal creators of the **Requiem** are Oscar nominated film director and winner of Un Certain Regard, **Rithy Panh** and Cambodia’s premier composer, **Dr. Him Sophy**. Both are childhood survivors of Pol Pot and in this work they collaborate for the first time to bring a shared history to a world audience.

The Requiem’s libretto is based on *Bangsokol* the Khmer Buddhist ritual that brings peace to the dead. Him Sophy’s music is a daring combination of traditional Khmer instruments and vocalists together with Western chamber music and chorus. Projected onto screens at the back of the stage is a large triptych created by Rithy Panh using elements from his personal films and archival footage. The projected film running throughout the performance, presents a visual history of Cambodia’s recent past, while illuminating the meaning of the musical work.

The theatrical performance was commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts, a not-for-profit organization, leading Cambodia’s artistic and cultural redevelopment. CLA’s vision is to revive their lost culture and bring international attention to the important role the arts can play in rebuilding war torn societies.

Cambodia’s cultural loss is taking generations to revive, and this work is huge for such an impoverished country. Realising they couldn’t undertake the production alone, CLA called on international performing arts professionals to help. New York based theatre and events specialist, Rachel Chanoff is producer, world-renowned Australian director and choreographer, Gideon Obarzanek, is Director of Staging and Trent Walker, an American scholar with years of experience studying Asian Buddhist texts, ritual and music, has written the libretto.

The film reveals the concerns of the international professionals who know the high stakes involved in mounting such an ambitious work. Around 40 people, including the traditional musicians and singers will tour the world with the production and the western-style musicians must be sourced in each location. The traditional musicians, who mostly don’t read music, have to adjust to new orchestras every time they perform. It is a challenging and expensive undertaking.

Phloeun Prim, the charismatic Executive Director of CLA, himself a child survivor, has for years been travelling the world asking arts organisations, philanthropists and governments, to become financial partners in the stage production.

With no suitable theatre or experienced western-style musicians available in Cambodia, the production needed somewhere to rehearse. The Government of Taiwan offered their help. In March 2017, in a Taipei theatre with the Taiwan Philharmonic Orchestra, cast, props and costumes, the Cambodians experienced their first full dress rehearsal …and we were there to film it.

As well as Rithy Panh and Him Sophy the traditional Cambodian performers also share on film their experiences of life under the Khmer Rouge and their reasons for taking part in the Requiem.

The film follows all these stories through preproduction leading up to the premiere performance at the Melbourne Festival. After Melbourne the Requiem toured to New York, Boston and Paris.

2019 was when the world remembered the fall of the Khmer Rouge Regime and the year the stage production was performed in Cambodia.

**RITHY PANH**: *“If you don’t talk, don’t examine it, it repeats, history repeats again and again. It’s a form of resistance.”*

**PHLOEUN PRIM** *“*…*this piece is not about the tragedy but for me it is really about the hope for Cambodia’s future.”*

As ***Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia*** reaches a world audience, the Cambodian creators hope they will have succeeded in opening a missing dialogue between survivors and the generations who have followed them.

This is a story of hope… the creators believe their work will tell a world, still besieged by conflict and genocide, that the arts can be a powerful tool for healing.

**CHARACTERS:**

**RITHY PAN** – DIRECTOR, DESIGNER & FILMMAKER

Rithy Pan’s film *“The Missing Picture*” was nominated for an Academy Award and won Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival. Recently he worked as a producer on Angelina Jollie’s film, *“First They Killed My father”* released in 2017.

One of 9 children, Rithy was born into a poor, intellectual family. His father was an idealistic, impractical, poet and teacher. His mother, the breadwinner of the family taught her children the importance of sharing and respect for others, attributes that stood Rithy in good stead during the years of terror under the Khmer Rouge.

Rithy childhood ended abruptly on 18th April 1975 with the arrival of the Khmer Rouge and the family was forcibly separated. Life as Rithy knew it was blown apart. Intimacy and affection were forbidden. The social fabric of their lives was destroyed. Within months they were immersed in a totalitarian environment full of violence and deprivation that continued for four years.

Rithy graphically explains the loss of dignity, of feeling more like an animal from hell than a human being. Even today he doesn’t understand why he lived. He is sure that he didn’t survive because he was stronger than others, but because of unexpected, human affection despite all the terrible things they were forced to endure.

Amongst the memories that have stayed with him throughout his life are children dying of hunger, of throwing dead bodies into unmarked graves devoid of names, ceremony, identity or history. As if they were nothing, as if they didn’t exist.

**HIM SOPHY** - COMPOSER

The ever smiling, engaging, Him Sophy, feels privileged to have come from a family of Cambodian musicians steeped in the traditional sacred music.

On that fateful day, the 18th April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge arrived in Phnom Penh, 12-year-old Him Sophy and a brother became separated from their family who were forced to walk into the countryside with thousands of others. The boys, hoping they would find their parents if they returned to the family’s village, walked for days without food. Eventually, their instincts were rewarded, and they found their family in their ancestral village.

Him Sophy too vividly recalls the constant fear of being killed that hung over his family who were known to be pro-capitalists. But under strict instruction from their father, they all kept very quiet and worked extremely hard. Eventually they convinced the overseers that they were good workers and could be trusted. And some of them survived. One brother was killed because he admitted he had worked for the Republican Army. Another, like countless others, was killed together with his wife and four young children for no obvious reason.

By 1976 Him Sophy was living in a youth work camp, sure he would die of starvation. Driven mad by hunger he was constantly afraid. Youth were supposed to be strong and powerful but the Regime forced them to work without food. With nothing to eat it was impossible to have any strength. They lived in terror knowing that if the Regime didn’t like what they saw, they would simply be killed.

Sometimes in the middle of the night Sophy would sneak away from the camp and ride a buffalo to his parents desperately hoping to find something to eat. Eventually, too weak to move, he was taken to a hospital devoid of medicine and overflowing with dying people. Afraid he wouldn’t survive he begged for permission to leave the hospital and once it was granted, crawled all the way back to his family.

He and others in his family miraculously survived until the collapse of the Regime. Once back in Phnom Penh the musically talented boy was awarded a scholarship to study in Moscow. Fourteen years later he had a PhD in composition and a western musical education that would carry him through the rest of his life.

**KEO SOPHY, KEO DORIVAN, KEO SONANKEVEL** - MUSICIANS

The Keo family have been musicians for at least five generations and with Sonankevel’s young daughter playing harp, they make up half the traditional ensemble travelling with the stage production.

Their particular survival story comes with an extraordinary twist.

Speaking passionately in Khmer, the brothers tell of the terrible hardships they experienced at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Like hundreds of thousands of others, the seven Keo children and their mother became separated from the father early on in the conflict.

Unlike most of their colleagues, their father, a professional musician, survived the purges by becoming a functionary of the Regime, deployed to broadcast their propaganda through music and song.

While their father spread the word of the Khmer Rouge, the children and their mother were sent to a primitive, farming, village in the outer reaches of the Prey Veng province. Food was scarce and they were forced to eat anything they could find. Their diet was reduced to insects, grass, weeds and even the soaked leather from drums they had somehow managed to keep with them. Two sisters died from starvation but the remaining five children survived alongside their mother.

The fate of their father was unknown until the collapse of the Regime four years later when the family was reunited. It was then that they learned that his musical skills had saved his life.

We filmed two of the brothers, Sophy and Dorivan as they returned to the Prey Veng village where they had lived. Forty years on many of the older villagers remembered the family and their music. The village had changed little and was a stark reminder of those difficult days from their childhood.

After the fall of the Regime, the family returned to Phnom Penh, their father formed a musical troupe in which they all played together until his death a few years ago. Today most of the large extended Keo family are involved in Cambodian traditional music. Using skills learned from his father, Sonankevei makes wooden instruments at his home where the family often gather to play music together. Like his brothers, he is a teacher at the University of Fine Arts.

All the family are committed to revitalising the traditional music learned from those who went before them. The Requiem affords them a wonderful vehicle to do just that.

**HIM SAVY –** SOLOIST

Savy, a vivacious, exuberant, performer, is one of two soloist for the stage production. She is the wife of Keo Sophy and niece of the composer, Him Sophy. It seems that family background, even today, is still a very strong component in bringing traditional Cambodian music to the public.

Savy remembers terrible fear as a child – she remembers guns going off – seeing her father being killed by Pol Pot. Like millions of other families, they too were sent out into the countryside as part of the Khmer Rouge’s despotic desire to create a totally agrarian society.

Whenever she sings on stage she is moved to tears, remembering those who died. But she also sees the Requiem as a way of bringing a brighter future to the next generation and all the generations following.

**CHHORN SAM ATH** – SOLOIST

Ath is the second soloist and oldest member of the Cambodian ensemble. Before the Khmer Rouge he was a traditional dancer, singer, musician and performer in theatre. He too came from a family of musicians and danced with the Royal ballet for the King.

He is a delightful, engaging storyteller who, whether in interview or on stage, has a face that totally lights up and pulls you along with his enthusiasm.

During those four terrible years his family too were separated and like everyone else, suffered enormously.

With the fall of the Regime in 1979 he returned to performing. In recent years he has been working for the Ministry of Culture trying to rebuild traditional dancing, in particular. His wife and daughters are also performers and dancers.

He still mourns the loss of the Master and his family who dedicated their life to teaching theatre skills. Those lessons remain with Ath and he feels a strong obligation to pass them on so that the knowledge and skills may continue through future generations.

The cast and crew of Bangsokol respect and draw on his broad knowledge of Cambodian culture and tradition.

 

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

Born to refugees who survived the most talked about “holocaust” of the 20th century, I was immediately drawn to this subject matter - a musical reflection on the genocide of a nation and a redemptive take on the effects of such horror on a surviving population.

For nearly two years I filmed the mounting of a new musical stage performance called ‘*Bangsokol – A Requiem for Cambodia*’. Cambodian composer, Him Sophy and internationally renowned filmmaker, Rithy Pahn, both survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, created this theatrical piece in memory of nearly two million Cambodians who were murdered at the hands of Pol Pot.

Once I began delving into this story, I realised how little I actually understood about the extent of Pol Pot’s terror on Cambodian society and the decimation of a rich, ancient, culture. I have seen many documentaries about those terrible years, but somehow expunged the details from my conscious mind, perhaps because of the genocide of my own large extended family by Hitler.

I’ve always wanted to make a music-based film and when this story presented itself I felt excited by it. With the story of genocide, survivors and a belief in the importance of the arts as a force for healing, I felt many strands of interest coming together for me.

I didn’t want to make a film with a conventional narration. I wanted the music and the interviews to drive the narrative of this very complex and multi-layered story, visually, musically and emotionally.

A triptych, a created by Rithy Pahn to complement the music, is projected on a huge backstage screen throughout the performance. Its presence is a wonderful bonus for our documentary as we have been able to re-interpret many of the images to enhance our cinematic style.

Sadly, this subject matter is absolutely relevant today. We still live in a world where genocide is ongoing and every day are confronted by the news of more and more refugees needing help.

In 2019 Cambodia reaches a significant milestone - 40 years since the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Despite the terrible political situation today, there are many, like those with whom we became involved while making this film, who are working hard to restore their lost traditional culture and who believe that the arts are an important tool for healing. Cambodia’s recent history is undoubtedly bleak. But positive, uplifting things do emerge from destruction.

I believe this theatrical performance is one such thing and our film about its creation will help take it to a world audience. It is an extremely important story and offers an opportunity not just for much-needed dialogue between the survivors of genocide and the generations who follow them but to remind a world that too easily forgets.

Aviva Ziegler



PRODUCTION TEAM:

Margaret Murphy Producer

Aviva Ziegler Director, Producer

Andrew Arestides, ASE Editor

Vanna Seang Director of Photography

**AVIVA ZIEGLER**

**Producer - Director**

Aviva Ziegler is one of Australia's most experienced and highly regarded documentarians.  Her extensive career has covered both commercial and public television.

*Quentin,* the highest rating documentary ever seen on Australian television, won her a Logie for Best Documentary, as did *Facing the Demons.*

Aviva’s career began with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s trail blazing, social issues series, *Chequerboard.*

She produced and directed for the highly successful *Willesee* documentary series for the Seven and Nine networks.   While an Executive Producer at Film Australia she oversaw a wide range of films that screened in Australia and internationally.

Her personal documentary, *What is a Jew to You?* won many accolades and numerous prizes at home and abroad.  Amongst other credits are *Secrets of the Jury Room*, ABC *Dynasties* and *Family Confidential* series, Fairweather Man, which won the NSW Premier’s Award for Scriptwriting in 2010.

Aviva is probably best known for the high-rating, four-part series *Plumpton High Babies*, screened on the ABC and its follow-up *Plumpton High 10 Years On*.

**MARGARET H. MURPHY**

**Executive Producer**

Margaret has many years of experience in television production in Australia and the UK, spanning production of documentaries, magazine, arts and entertainment programs. She has worked for public broadcasters and commercial networks.

 

(MARGARET MURPHY – continued)

As Commissioning Editor for SBS, credits include the documentary *Unfolding Florence*, documentary series *Great Australian Albums,* entertainment series*, RocKwi*z*, Food Safari*, *Nerds FC*, and *Newstopia*. Previously for the ABC, the arts magazine series *Review*, *The Home Show* and Logie award winning documentary series, *Ladies in Lines*.

When SBS created their subscription television arts channel, STUDIO, for the Foxtel platform, Margaret was engaged as Commissioning Editor and Executive Producer for all local production including documentaries, *Creative Minds, Raising the Curtain*, *David Campbell on Broadway*, and coverage of live performances. Several programs were nominated for ASTRA Awards.

She Executive Produced the Danish TV and SBS co-production of the *Crown Prince Couple’s Awards*, followed by SBS ‘tentpole’ productions, the *Eurovision Song Contest* and *Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras.*

As an independent producer “Wandering Souls” is her most recent production.

**ANDREW ARESTIDES, ASE**

**Editor**

Andrew’s credits include *Fairweather Man*, an examination of the life and work of artist Ian *Fairweathe*r - winner NSW Premier’s Award for Scriptwriting 2010. *The Cars That Ate China* won him the ASE award for Best Editing of a Documentary 2008. *Facing The Demons, was* a powerful story of restorative justice won a Logie and the UN Peace Award for TV Documentary in 2000; and he edited the acclaimed AFI award-winning *Wedding In Ramallah*. He also co-produced and edited *Junction House Blues* for SBS.

In 2003 Andrew was co-recipient of an AFI award for Best Achievement in Editing for a non-feature film for *Painting with Light in a Dark World.*  He was awarded his second ASE Award for Best Editing in a Documentary in 2010 for his work on *My Asian Heart* directed by David Bradbury.

In 2015 he edited *Afghanistan Inside Australia’s War,*  a 3 part series for the ABC directed by Victoria Pitt and *The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe,*  a feature documentary directed by Ros Horin, which premiered at the Sydney Film Festival 2016.



(ANDREW ARESTIDES, ASE – continued)

He edited *Monsieur Mayonnaise,* a feature documentary directed by Trevor Graham, which premiered at the Melbourne Film Festival 2016.

Andrew has just completed editing a documentary on the Kimberleys which premiered at the Melbourne Film Festival.

**VANNA SEANG**

**Cinematographer**

Vanna Seang, born in Cambodia 1983, but residing in Australia, began his career shooting home movies and school functions. After completing a Diploma in SCREEN (Film & Television) he began working as a sound recordist and camera assistant on a lifestyle fishing television show called Escape with E.T, broadcast nationally on Network 10, 7, 9 and eventually FOXTEL. Vanna spent 5 years tallying up 5 series, totalling120 episodes in all.

Over the next 10 years parallel to his other work Vanna worked for the ABC on programs such as News24, 7:30 Report, Midday Report, Lateline and 4 Corners. In 2012, he became lead cinematographer and editor for a community arts program “Chatterbox”, broadcasted nationally on FOXTEL’s Aurora Channel.

Vanna moved from corporate, music videos, shorts/feature films, documentaries and commercial television.

2018, Vanna was taken as a Director’s Attachment on a feature film shot in Cambodia by Cause Way Films. He also produced and directed a short drama, "1979", based on his family's journey fleeing Cambodia in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge.

A member of the Australian Cinematography Society Vanna has been awarded for his Cinematography work but sadly passed away due to a sudden illness in 2018.