

A Unique Collaboration Brings the Cambodian American Story to Life

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Jose Abaoag, right, is the lead character, Cam, and Sreymom Serey, left, plays his mother, Sovanara, in Mark Jenkins' play about Cambodian returnees. Photo credit: Stuart Isett.

Following the recent production of Michael Golamco's play "Year Zero" by SIS Productions, the Cambodian American immigrant experience is again on stage. "Red Earth, Gold Gate, Shadow Sky" is a collaboration between sculptor and designer Sopheap Pich, playwright and UW Drama School professor Mark Jenkins, and artist Don Fels.

The play was originally conceived by Fels, based on his experience working with Cambodian Americans. "When I was in Phnom Penh in 2005, I learned that Cambodian American men were being deported to Cambodia," he said. "I had worked in the Cambodian community in Tacoma in the early 1990's and was aware of difficulties that young men faced growing up in that environment. I knew that some got in trouble and did time in jail."

But Fels learned later that many of these immigrants were again arrested and then deported for these crimes. "After several discussions in Phnom Penh, I was invited to return and work with the deportees," Fels said. "I am an artist, not a social worker, but I was outraged by what I learned, and thought perhaps I could be of some use."

Fels obtained grant funding and worked in Phnom Penh for two months in 2008. "Somewhere in that time before I returned, I came up with the idea that the best

way for me to help was to create a play about what I saw as an outrageous injustice.”

At that point, Fels contacted playwright Jenkins, with whom he had talked about collaborating for many years. “Jenkins arranged to visit Phnom Penh towards the end of my 2008 visit, and together we met with several of the men who had been deported there,” said Fels. “He was as taken by their stories as I, and then and there committed to writing a play about their lives.”

Work continued after Fels and Jenkins left Cambodia. “We continued to do research once back in Seattle, and Mark has met often with several people in the Cambodian community here.”

Cross-cultural artistic creation proved to be challenging. “We felt particularly presumptuous; two white males developing a play about a community’s experience that wasn’t our own,” said Fels. “We have tried very hard to make sure that the writing rings true for its subject.”

The truthfulness of this work was made possible by the input of Seattle’s Cambodian-American community. “Many people within the community have met with us, advised Mark, read the play and made comments,” said Fels. “It is not a community- or committee-written play, but we have benefitted enormously from the good will and knowledge of the local Cambodian American community.”

With a complete script, Fels and Jenkins set about to deepen their collaboration with the Cambodian American community. “When I was in Phnom Penh, I started doing sketches for some of what I thought the visual environment of the play (which didn’t of course yet exist) might look like,” said Fels. “I kept seeing all manner of things being transported there in baskets.” This led him to sculptor Sopheap Pich.

Java Café owner Dana Langlois helped Fels and Pich get acquainted. “Don was looking for someone whose work may relate to themes of boundaries, displacement, containment,” said Pich. “When he visited me at my studio, he thought my language of using the grids would adapt well to his ideas.”

Fels facilitated further collaboration. “I met with Sopheap several more times while I was in Phnom Penh, and brought Mark to meet him when he arrived in the city,” he said. “At the time Sopheap wasn’t known outside Cambodia, but I knew this would change very quickly.”

Pich now has an exhibition at the UW’s Henry Art Gallery entitled “Compound,” in which he uses many of the same sculptural impulses as for “Red Earth.” Pich said of this work, as well as the Cambodian immigrant experience, “The piece as a whole is my interpretation of an idea of a city built from the ashes of destruction.”

Pich elaborated: “It also has to do with ideas that we build and destroy at the same time and sometimes it’s hard to see the two. It’s easy to see progress, but destruction is not always so visible.”

Next, the Fels-Jenkins-Pich team brought in actors: “The cast is almost all volunteers from the Seattle Cambodian community, very few with any acting experience,” said Fels. “The energy level and commitment is high.”

Now, the group will perform under the guidance of New York director Victor Pappas. "We hope that this workshop of the play will result in it being picked up for full production by a Seattle-based theatre company, and that then it will tour nationally and internationally," Fels said.

Fels, Jenkins, and Pich hope to present the authentic experience of those alive during Pol Pot's regime. "The truth is that the people our age in the Khmer community were almost all murdered: they are not alive to create this play," said Fels. "So we stepped into the breach, hoping that it will do some good."

"Perhaps it might inspire younger Cambodian Americans to continue telling their story."