

CAMBODIAN WRITER HIGHLIGHTED IN "A TOMB FOR KHUN SRUN"



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Cambodia was once full of literary works of satire, poetry, critiques and quips, but today not much is known about its legendary authors. One film seeks to change that in "A Tomb for Khun Srun," a documentary film by Eric Galmard which will be screened for the first time as part of the Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF) in Phnom Penh this week.

Mr. Galmard was introduced to the works of Khun Srun by a friend who translated parts of the Cambodian author's work into French in 2000. Having finished a stint as a program coordinator of the French department at the Royal University of Phnom Penh's Foreign Language Institute, Mr. Galmard was stunned by the skills displayed in Mr. Khun's work.

"This was a Cambodian teacher in the late 60s coming from a poor rural background and who started to experiment at an early age with various literary forms like first-person autobiographical texts, modern fiction, short stories influenced by French existentialism, (notably Sartre) satirical poetry and philosophical anecdotes," said Mr. Galmard. "It was brilliant, and deeply connected at the same time with Khmer traditional culture, especially Buddhism. The notion of karma was notably considered from various angles and in addition, a sentimental attachment for rural lifestyle emerged from those texts.



A still from the film, "A Tomb of Khun Srun."

"It was as if Khun Srun came to fill a personal feeling of emptiness in regards to modern Cambodian artworks."

Born in 1945, Mr. Khun is revered as one of the most brilliant Cambodian writers of the 1960s to 70s, known for his biting humor and wit about his generation. Part of the revolutionary guerillas in 1973, he was executed by the Khmer Rouge regime in December 1978.

The Search For the Intellectual Word

"What I read [about Khun Srun] didn't fit at all with hardline communist, Maoist oriented ideology," Mr Galmard explained. "Because Khun Srun showed indeed a deep disgust for violence, and emphasized in his texts the

importance of education, of thinking for one's self, of human rights."

Curious, Mr. Galmard set out to learn more about this mysterious writer and decided to make a film to bring attention to his literary voice, both autobiographical and critical; sincere and satirical. Before shooting the film, Mr. Galmard researched his writer's works and life. He read Khun Srun's available books while searching out and interviewing survivors of his family and former fellow workers at the Phnom Penh railway repair unit during the Khmer Rouge regime.

"My first priority was to build a filmic space where his voice, his literary voice could be listened to by the spectators," said Mr. Galmard.

"Because it was a unique point of view, that of a bright Khmer intellectual of that time, which again deserved to be listened to carefully."

"There is actually another reason I made this film," Mr. Galmard said. "I thought the critical way Khun Srun was looking at the Cambodian society of that time, notably in his satirical poems, was still meaningful for today's society, when it comes, for example, to land speculation or corruption, or the hidden problems created by development.

"Everything has changed and nothing has changed, his voice seems to whisper," explained Mr. Galmard. "Therefore it's not only a question of reflecting his life and work in the film, it is also the present that the film targets though his voice."

A student of literature and film, Mr. Galmard has worked in Cambodia, the Philippines, Japan and Fiji. He now teaches film at the University of Strasbourg in France, focusing on documentary cinema and Asian cinema. "A Tomb for Khun Srun" is his first feature-length film.

"I simply hope that the film will help the audience rediscover a rather unknown Cambodian writer from a lost generation, an intellectual with a unique point of view, who deserves to be read and considered again."

Screenings (with English subtitles) with Q&A sessions are tomorrow, at 5:15 pm, at the French Institute and Sunday at 6 pm, and Monday at 10:30 pm, at the Bophana Center. ■