

Chasing the past

Rajan Venkataraman

About halfway through *A Tomb for Khun Srun*, Eric Galmard's documentary film about the Cambodian poet who was executed during the final days of the Khmer Rouge era, there is a brief appearance by the poet's brother. From a Phnom Penh rooftop, he points to the site of a former prison where his older brother was held by the Lon Nol regime for being a "progressive".

But then he cuts short the interview, saying, "Why do you foreigners rehash all that? We're evoking these sad recollections but ... what counts is the terrible situation today. I thank you for your interest in my brother's story but, for me, it isn't important." He slowly walks away.

The scene captures the heart of the film. Director Galmard has clearly thought deeply about the question posed by Khun Srun's brother — what purpose can a film about a poet possibly serve when set against one of the most brutal episodes in human history? What good can it do for Cambodian society today? To his credit, he avoids any easy answers, and the result is an exceptional and moving film that works on many levels.

Mortality and the impermanence of memory were themes in Khun Srun's poetry. Succeeding generations will have their own priorities and preoccupations, and that's how it should be, he felt.

*If I die at this time today, what will happen?
My books will gradually disappear from my
cupboard until it's empty.
I'll be taken for burial, despite recommendations
... And who cares anyway, as I'll be unaware.
I'll probably be talked about, and then gradually
forgotten,
Because I'll no longer be in contact with the living.*

Galmard finds a partner in his journey in the person of Khun Srun's daughter, Khun Khem, as she follows in the footsteps of her father from his childhood in rural Cambodia. Khun Khem is an excellent guide and the responses she elicits from the various people who knew her father, including former co-workers, family members and even a prison guard, are natural, thoughtful, thought-provoking and occasionally laced with humour.

But Khun Khem is not simply a passive observer; she is dealing with her own problems and challenges in the present day. As a girl, she was with the Khmer Rouge and, following the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, she fled with them into the forests where she experienced severe hardships and witnessed scenes of appalling cruelty.

Because of those associations, she continues to face harassment, and property developers are trying to force her off her land. She contemplates moving to Phnom Penh where she hopes her teenage son can get an education.

Khun Srun's political consciousness crystallised at the time of the 1970 coup led by General Lon Nol against Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a time of authoritarian rule and widespread corruption. He wrote about the consumer culture and the extreme wealth of those in positions of power:

*You are famous, Madam, for your jewels,
your gold and your diamonds.
Your riches seem inexhaustible,
there's still enough for four or five generations to
come.
But in this life, Madam, have you done good?
I'm not so sure.
Money, shops, shopping, cars,
but you don't care about virtue.
Have you won the lottery? We've never heard about it.
Or is it an inheritance? Difficult to say.
Or your husband's salary? Not likely.
Let's not look any further! It's the result of your
good karma!*

Khun Srun saw in the Khmer Rouge a possibility for a fairer society, and he joined them in 1973. After their takeover of Cambodia in 1975, he was assigned to a propaganda unit, but was later sent to an engineering factory where he and colleagues tried to meet the unrealistic demands placed upon them. He became increasingly distressed with the violence and brutality of the civil war.

*Oh! How I wish men would stop killing each other!
And finally be reconciled! Only compassion can save the
world.*

Like many 'intellectuals,' a term that included just about any educated or professional person, Khun Srun eventually fell foul of the Khmer Rouge, and was imprisoned and then executed, in 1978.

In the film, the poetry of Khun Srun is beautifully read in voice-over by Yuos Sorangsaveth, capturing the rhythm and emotion of the verses. It is accompanied by archival footage and propaganda films from the periods

of his life, as well as scenes of modern-day Phnom Penh, a city of high-rise luxury apartment buildings, busy thoroughfares and a young generation focussed on the problems of today rather than the ghosts of the past.

The film is an eloquent memorial to Khun Srun. It pays tribute to the poet's craft and evokes the times that shaped him without passing judgement on a life lived in circumstances that most of us, a generation later, can scarcely comprehend.

The Last Reel is a very different film and, yet, the parallels with *A Tomb for Khun Srun* are striking. A feature film with elements of family melodrama and a coming-of-age story, it too follows a daughter as she tries to understand the experiences of a parent, in this case her mother, during the Khmer Rouge era, and the repercussions of those experiences on her own life.

Sophoun is a rebellious Phnom Penh college student who enjoys a life of nightclubbing and hanging out with her boyfriend Veasna and his gang of motorbike-riding friends. One night, by chance, in an abandoned cinema, she sees a film in which she recognises her own mother as the lead actress in a historical romance. She learns from the film's director that the last reel of the film is missing: lost or destroyed, like much of Cambodia's cultural heritage, during the years of civil war.

As a tribute to her mother, Sophoun sets out to re-film the final scenes with herself taking on the role of the heroine and recruiting her friends and a kindly college professor to serve as cast and crew. In the process, she learns much about the hardship and famine, the imprisonment, torture and mass killing, as well as the moral compromises that her parents' generation endured.

Unlike *A Tomb for Khun Srun*, *The Last Reel* is not directed by a foreigner, but by the Cambodian director Sotho Kulikar, whose own father died during the war. While the plot features a couple of unlikely contrivances to move the story along, she generally elicits good performances from her young and inexperienced actors, including Ma Rynet as Sophoun. The cast also features the veteran Cambodian actor Dy Saveth, whose career spanned the years of Cambodia's civil war, and her presence provides added poignancy to the film.

In the 1960s and early 70s, Cambodia had a thriving film industry and during this 'golden age' its romances and historical dramas found audiences around Southeast Asia. Like poetry and other 'progressive' arts, however, cinema was wiped out under the Khmer Rouge. At the end of *The Last Reel*, there is a moving series of still images of theatre and film actors and directors who were executed or died in the brutal labour camps.

A Tomb for Khun Srun and *The Last Reel* have been screened at film festivals around the world and have been awarded prizes for their artistic merit. One hopes they represent a re-emergence of a Cambodian film industry. They elegantly portray a country rushing to embrace the benefits of development and a consumer lifestyle, while trying to make sense of the past and the legacy of suffering, bereavement and guilt still affecting so many of its citizens. □

P O E T R Y

David Chandler

Cambodian dancers

They've come this way before,
time after time, encased in silk
their elbows bending back,
toes curling up and down.

Impelled by memory
and jangling instruments
their dances talk to us
about seduction, evil and escape.

The dancers also talk to ghosts
with lucid, silent sequences
drawn from earlier dances
that emanate from them like prayers.

Small elegy

Your death keeps writing poems about itself
but it's immune to poetry
and after all, "Where there is leisure for fiction,"
Dr Johnson wrote, "There is little grief."
Where there is grief, I guess,
no poems can reach those pitch black, silent places.

The Last Reel

Director: Kulikar Sotho, Hanuman Films

A Tomb for Khun Srun

Director: Eric Galmard, Dora Films