Act 2: Our Land’s Compassion

When I tell Dr. Him Sophy that Morm Sokly’s favorite role is the wife in the Yiké play Makthoeung, he recalls with delight seeing this play performed after the Khmer Rouge period. He remembers Sokly’s favorite song in which the wife sells perfumes and speaks of the beauty of women. “Though she loves her old husband,” explains Sophy, “she is kidnapped by a powerful official and a rumor is spread that she betrayed her husband.” He sees the play as a great piece of social critique about how power corrupts.28

In total, there are about twenty traditional Yiké melodies, which are repeated throughout the repertoire of Yiké plays. The familiarity of melodies can sustain Cambodian tradition and delight the public. “It is not like our opera,” Sophy laughs. “Our opera” is Where Elephants Weep, a piece commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), an organization whose mission is to support traditional Khmer music through educational programs and performance. Where Elephants Weep both respects and breaks with tradition; it is the product of our desires to, as Sophy puts it, “gather musical genres in unlikely combinations.” Sophy says globalization is a good goal for a composer.29

Through six years of collaboration, Sophy and I created a score and a libretto that speak about the clashes among Cambodians between tradition and modernity and older and younger generations, and about the effect of the diaspora on Cambodian culture. After the genocide, during the 1980s, 147,000 Cambodian survivors arrived in the United States as refugees and were resettled in different states throughout the country, with the largest populations located in Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts.30

Our opera follows the lives of Cambodians from the diaspora and their return to Cambodia in 1995. Sam, a refugee from the Khmer Rouge genocide, leaves America and returns to his homeland deeply conflicted about his roots and native culture. He unexpectedly falls in love with Bopha, a Cambodian pop star, forever transforming his life. The music fuses traditional Cambodian music with Western rock and rap. The opera is sung in English and Khmer, with surtitles in both languages.

The story is more complex than a traditional Cambodian story or a commercial American story. It is a blend of two worlds and two cultures and an ongoing dialogue between Him Sophy and myself. It combines a traditional Cambodian orchestra and a Cambodian rock band, so that the very form of the piece is a kind of cultural exchange. Though the underlying narrative involves the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, we have designed the piece to shine a light on the future. The plot is very loosely based on the classical love story Tum Teav, but the themes have been modernized. Based on our discussions I wrote an initial libretto, and then rewrote the songs to fit the music. The music was then rewritten to fit the opera’s developing story. This back and forth process continued as Sophy and I worked with both
Khan's Bodyguards (Dang Kosal, Tony Real Roun, and Mel Sagrado Maghuycp) guard the gate, rapping in an opera that brought hip-hop and traditional Khmer idioms into relationship. *Where Elephants Weep* was performed in Lowell, Massachusetts and at Chenla Theatre, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; produced in association with Amrita Performing Arts and John Burt, executive producer. Photo by Rafael Winer.

Cambodian and American actors, singers, directors, choreographers, musicians, and designers.

In one of the story's turning points Sam meets an older mentor, the Flute Teacher, in the countryside, and is guided by him with the song, "Our Land's Compassion." The Flute Teacher reiterates the feeling of the Khmer playwright, Pech Tum Kravel, that the genocide came like a "sudden storm"—that it was the result of circumstances that could have been different. Ieng Sithul, the actor/singer who plays the role of the Flute Teacher, is a Cambodian celebrity and a genocide survivor. As he sings this song to Sam in Khmer he verbalizes Cambodia's losses but also maintains hope for a more peaceful future, helping audiences to mourn but also to reconnect with something beautiful from the past.
During Pol Pot it was sink or swim,
you need to remember it was circumstance.
The incredible loss happened so fast
at the speed of a vicious storm
with my own eyes I saw it undone.
You feel shame but there is still a bridge
to what was before, nga . . . nga . . . nga . . .
(pointing to the land)
I remember your mother rocking you
singing you her words of truth.
Her voice would spread out through the trees,
traveling softly on the breeze.
(showing him)
Your parents are in this place
I see them sometimes. 21

Where Elephants Weep previewed in 2006 in Lowell, Massachusetts, when Cambodian Living Arts joined with a consortium of Cambodian-American and U.S. organizations to bring the opera to the 1,500-seat auditorium of Lowell High School. This was a year-long process of coalition building on the part of community leaders including Samkhann Khoen and LZ Nunn, working with Cambodian Living Arts producer John Burt. We did three preview performances for largely Cambodian-American audiences to prepare for the opera’s opening in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 2008. My libretto had been translated into Khmer, and Suon Bunrith, the company manager for the Cambodian musicians and performers, spent weeks refining and retranslating the English and Khmer surtitles to accommodate the changes we made in the workshop.

As with Photographs from S-21, it was only because of the process of relationship building that occurred among the artists involved in the project that Where Elephants Weep was able to help people grapple with their painful past and imagine a better future. We ran into a number of cultural and aesthetic conflicts—between Cambodians and Americans, young and old, Cambodians from the diaspora and Cambodians who still live in their homeland—and it was in facing and learning from these conflicts that we, and our opera, grew.

For example, there is a scene in the opera involving a party at the home of one of the sons of a fictional Cambodian prince. At first, in the Lowell workshop, the American costumer dressed the female chorus—actresses primarily in their twenties, playing women of various ages—in white Khmer blouses. But our lead actor, Ieng Sithul, objected to this costume, explaining that young Cambodian women would never wear that particular length of sleeve, which was too the elbow. Sithul
insisted that Cambodian audiences would be very distracted by this, and so we
decided to make the sleeves longer.

We also encountered a challenge with Him Sophy’s score, which required from
the two young Cambodian lead roles an extraordinary combination of talents dif-
ficult to find in any performer, regardless of ethnicities or cultural backgrounds. They
need to sing in two very distinct idioms that form the aesthetic axis of the piece:
Western rock and traditional Khmer. When Sophy composed the opera, he never
thought he was composing especially for Cambodians or Cambodian-American
singers, but “for any singer who sings well.” Born into a musical family in 1963 in
Prey Veng Province, Sophy left Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge genocide to study
for thirteen years at The Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. While he achieved
great success there in Western idioms, his doctoral thesis applied Western theory
and musicology to traditional Khmer melodic and tuning systems. His professor of
composition, Roman Ledeniev, always encouraged him to be a Cambodian com-
poser, not a Western composer, says Sophy. He explains that the ancient Khmers
never built a single style of temple or bas-reliefs, but used many different styles,
each with its own beauty and aesthetic. “Monotony is the enemy of the arts; art is
freedom and experience,” he says. Sophy is interested not only in preserving Cam-
bodian cultural traditions but also in creating new ones.2

We cast the two young lead roles with Asian-American singers who were trained
in the West. Our inability to find sufficiently trained Cambodian-American per-
formers speaks in part to the legacy of the Khmer Rouge period, during which so
many artists died or left the country and local cultural and artistic practices were
nearly wiped out. Sophy and his orchestrator, Scot Stafford, share the dream that the
opera will inspire more Cambodians to get involved in music theatre and thereby in
future productions of Where Elephants Weep.

Many of our most difficult moments during our rehearsals in Lowell came from
the way Buddhist monks were depicted on stage. Cambodian-Americans, and West-
erners who know Cambodia, remarked that our depiction of monks as only devout
and proper was unrealistic. “What about the fact that in Phnom Penh monks are
smoking and playing violent video games in internet cafes?” they asked. But the truth
is that Cambodian theatre is not primarily concerned with realism. It is a sacred, ritu-
ålistic form that departs from realism even in the very language used, for example,
there is a separate vocabulary of swearwords for the stage, distinct from the one
used on the street. Sithul explains that the price of insulting one’s public is too high.

Sophy and I have both seen how the relationships built between and among
artists and audiences can help people heal. Through the process of collaboration
and witnessing, people can feel safe trying to express themselves—and failing and
trying again. They can feel their interconnectedness, learn to deal with differences
productively, and work together to make sense of their life experiences.
Sophy is glad that he has the opportunity to experience all this with *Where Elephants Weep*—to express himself, to serve his country, to preserve a part of his culture, and to innovate stylistically. And he is grateful for people like playwright Pech Tum Kravil who, since surviving the Khmer Rouge regime, have been dedicated to restoring, preserving, and developing the artistic and cultural practices that were nearly destroyed. Through his assiduous documentation of the traditional performing arts in his country, Kravil has enlarged the space in which artists can work and increased their ability to imagine what’s possible.

Still, Sophy worries that the support to the arts provided by the Cambodian government is too little and too inconsistent. He remembers seeing plays by Cambodian playwright Hang Tun Hak in the 1970s whose artistry was comparable to that in works by Molière. But with an unreliable Ministry of Culture, Cambodian artists have floundered. And Sophy wonders, where are all the other opportunities and advocates? Who will write, who will perform, if artists are not supported? And, most importantly, when? Because there is no time to waste.

**Act 3: The Sound of the Buffalo Horn**

In Tewksbury, Massachusetts, at the Marriott Residency Inn, I am working with Suon Bunrith on the subtitles for the Lowell performance of *Where Elephants Weep*. I’m getting giddy from looking at slides of Khmer and English words on computer screens for weeks at a time. Rith makes me laugh because he is very serious in his expression, a bit of a straight man in the jumble of singing and music going on around us. There are the Asian-American singer/actors from New York mixed with the performers/musicians from Phnom Penh, via Lowell.

I can hear Leng Sithul rehearsing alone with a tape recorder, listening to the melodies and words he needs to memorize. Him Sophy tells me that Sithul never learned to read music because he never had the time. Sithul has had a busy career. He is an actor and singer famous for his performances of Yiké and Bassac, his Khmer karaoke DVDs (which can be found in any of the Khmer video stores in the United States), and his movie career, which he has recently given up because of his heart disease. Born in 1957, Sithul studied singing at RUPA until the Khmer Rouge came to power. After the regime fell, his career picked up again and in 1981 he became famous for his Yiké performance of the love story *Tum Teav*. He also serves as an *achaa*, a layperson–expert in Buddhist and traditional rituals, and he is sought after for weddings.

When I first met Sithul in Cambodia, he told me he was surprised to see Khmer musicians working with an American woman, as this doesn’t usually happen. He himself relished the cultural exchange between artists and was quick to commit to this project, taking on the roles of the Chapey [lute] Singer, the Abbot, and the Flute Teacher.
Margaret J. Wheatley, writer, organizational consultant, and advocate of deep listening, describes the value of "staying curious about each other," and Sithul maintains an admirable balance between curiosity about the other and preservation of his own cultural traditions. He taught the Asian-American performers, Marc de la Cruz and Eric Bondoc, how to play the role of a monk properly, how to deal respectfully with the body of someone who has just been shot, and how to show the proper reverence in a Buddhist temple. When I asked him if we could bend the tradition a bit to tell the story more clearly and dramatically, he listened and tried to find an alternative. For example, during one rehearsal Sithul, while playing the Abbot, vigorously threw the book of Buddhist scriptures at the feet of Sam, another character, to show his displeasure with Sam's decision to leave the monkhood. Personally, I loved this choice for its dramatic impact, but was surprised that this kind of emotional, physical gesture was allowed.

And yet, Sithul was adamant that the young female protagonist Bopha might not touch her lover on stage—even by mistake and in a moment of great emotion. At this point in the play, her lover, Sam, is clad in monk's robes, and Sithul insisted that any physical contact would be a transgression. How he felt about this was more than endorsed by the musicians, who felt so upset because of the actors' touching that they threatened to quit. The Filipina-American actress, Marie-France Arcilla, needed to display her character's love for Sam while standing at a respectful distance from him. I still wonder if there would have been a way for her to touch him: the actress was not touching a real monk, so we were not asking her to do something against Buddhist tenets. She was touching an actor dressed as a monk. This was an ongoing negotiation, but the real reversal came in Phnom Penh when I was inspired to rewrite the song leading into this scene. Michael K. Lee, the performer playing Sam, and the director, Robert McQueen, helped me to see that the scene was about Sam finding his own way separate from Bopha's. And so the issue of touching became suddenly moot. After seeing the newly revised scene in rehearsal, Sithul told me that we had found Sam and Bopha's true journey. This episode confirmed my idea of the rehearsal space as a safe place to expose cultural assumptions, to challenge and defend them, and even to err—in a spirit of learning.

Outside of his performance in the show, Sithul used performance to build relationships and a sense of community among the cast, the crew, and the audience. To wish everyone luck before the preview, he led the creative team and the Lowell Cambodian community in a Khmer ritual. The musicians from the opera played their traditional instruments as he made offerings of fruit to an altar in the Angkor Dance troupe's rehearsal space. Him Sophy and I were given lighted incense, and with the entire company of cast and crew we approached Sithul and the dancers from the troupe to have white threads tied around our wrists. Two months after we left Lowell, I saw the New York City-based stage manager, and he was still wearing
the white thread! We remembered Sithul and how before each performance in Lowell the lighting of incense backstage threatened the magnanimous fire alarm system of Lowell High School. The stage manager had constantly worried that the alarms would go off as the performance was starting... (but they didn't).

After a performance of *Where Elephants Weep*, a Cambodian-American audience member told me that his American foster mother had asked him the meaning for Cambodians of the sound of the buffalo horn, a major theme in our story. The man told her that the sound of the buffalo horn permits humans to change anger into crying.

The three Lowell previews of *Where Elephants Weep* were sold out and received standing ovations, and Ieng Sithul’s performance was lauded by Cambodians and Westerners alike. But Sithul still feels hopeless because Cambodian politicians don’t value art. He is upset that the government is not taking care of Morm Sokly—who has suddenly become quite ill—since she has contributed so much to the country. Sithul is proud of his collaboration with Him Sophy, whose talent was one of the key motivations for Sithul to leave his family and career to come to the United States and work on *Where Elephants Weep*. During rehearsals, Sithul and Sophy often discussed the need to illuminate Cambodian traditions while continuing to be forward-thinking. In the mornings, when Sithul approached the white van that took us back and forth from the hotel to the performance space, the American performers lovingly called him the “national treasure.”