For the past ten years, I have been writing plays about Cambodia. In early 2001, I went to Phnom Penh on a playwright’s residency grant from the Asian Cultural Council. During the two and a half months I was there, I did two plays with Khmer actors from the National Theatre and conducted research for a new play, *Silence of God*, which would be produced at the Contemporary American Theater Festival.

Hall of Fame

These are the women I place inside my personal hall of fame. Chanthol Oung, the director of the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center, is wearing a well-pressed white blouse that highlights her dark and youthful face as she shows me upstairs to her cool office. As though uttering a mantra, she does not stop to breathe until she is done: “Confidential crisis shelter, legal representation, reintegration, vocational training, community education, monitoring violence, capacity building.” She says there are men who will appear in her office, dressed in police or military uniforms, to demand she give their battered wives back. She tells me she says to them calmly, “We will let your wives know you are looking for them.” There is a foreigner, she says, who raped young women, paid off the police, bribed the court, and then came to find her, yelling at her through his car window. She couldn’t hear what he was saying because she was outside the center, driving away in a closed Jeep. A general in the government owns a brothel where women and girls are locked up. Two women inside the brothel throw letters out the windows, asking for help. She says that the mayor has closed down the brothel, but it is still open.

The second woman in my hall of fame, Kek Galabru, is dressed in a purple, floor-length, iridescent silk dress and a white silk scarf, which she drapes around herself in various ways. She is the founder of LICADHO, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. When she speaks about the Cambodian prime minister, she looks toward the city of Phnom Penh, as if he is there, hanging in thin air outside the curtained window. I can see him in her gaze. Her face moves from radiance to shadow. Information suggests that he could be involved in kidnapping,
theft, bribery, and drugs. The French, who donate money to human-rights programs, don’t want to know about this corruption.

I ask her about hope, and she looks at me. “Yes, you must have it,” she says.

I meet Vannath Chea, the president of the Center for Social Development, on my birthday. Also gracefully dressed, she serves tea at a round table in her office. She’s curious why I want to meet her. She says she is humble before the problem of “reconciliation” in Cambodia: the question of how to move on from the genocide. She bought land for a house. The house is near Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge extermination center, now a genocide museum. As the construction crews were digging the foundation, they found bones of arms. The bones were tied together with electrical cord. She shows me how by putting together her own lower arms. She had the bones burned on her property, and the ashes were placed in a pagoda in Kandal Province. Every day, she prays to the bones at an altar in her house. She hopes that what she accomplishes each day will honor the spirits of those who are under her house. She gets Kleenex tissue for us as we sit together at the round table. Maybe we can go to the pagoda, she says.

She cannot read my plays, she says, because she has no time to read. She glances at the piles of paper on her desk: she doesn’t even have time to read the newspaper. When I tell her I have come to Cambodia to do theater, she says that the arts are like women: the first to be degraded in poverty and war.

The fourth woman, Sochua Mu, Cambodia’s Minister of Women’s Affairs, comes to pick me up in her Jeep. Her driver takes us to an Italian restaurant, where we sit outside. She tells me she must dress the part of the Khmer woman and try to teach the men she works with that women are also precious gems. In Khmer culture, women are cotton and if cotton falls in the mud, it is permanently soiled. A gem, which the man is, never gets soiled. So Sochua says to the men, “Women are precious gems.” Sochua has been serious in taking to court a few men who have tarnished precious gems.

Pich Tum Kravel

At the Ministry of Culture, I wait for Pich Tum Kravel and Mao Keng in Kravel’s office, which has a prefab quality. Kravel’s coat and tie rest on the back of his chair. The office is empty of papers and books. I make a series of calls on my cell phone, one to Kravel. I never once reach Kravel on his cell phone. My call is always answered by a group of women whom I imagine to be sitting in a circle around the cell phone, picking it up, calling out Khmer words to me, to each other, and to Kravel, who is certainly not there. After a while, a woman appears in the office where I am waiting. She’s totally mystified to find me. She quickly turns on the air conditioner, returns with tea, and quietly closes the door.
Kravel and Keng arrive. The foremost living playwright in Cambodia, Kravel has taken a government post: Undersecretary of State for the Performing Arts, Fine Arts, and Libraries. An accomplished, erudite, and sophisticated man, he gracefully takes the Khmer translation of my play from me and promises to study it.

When I ask if my project is in place, Keng, the director of the National Theatre, says very simply to Kravel, in Khmer, that the actors are “waiting.” Kravel translates in French, “Les acteurs attendent.” We laugh at the simplicity of what Keng has just said and at his deadpan expression. Kravel is worried that the standard of acting has fallen: there was a time when they had actors who could do Shakespeare and Molière, he says. Before the Pol Pot era, Kravel himself was called the Romeo of Cambodia. He wrote a play based on a famous poem, *Tum Teav,* this was the Khmer *Romeo and Juliet,* and Kravel played Romeo. When I ask him to write down in Khmer the words *I am a writer* because I need to know the phrase for my new play, his handwriting is like that of all French-educated Khmer: beautiful and careful. I remember that when I learned to write French from my grandparents, the notebook had several sets of lines to make sure I got the heights of the letters right. I ask Kravel, as I ask everyone, about Pol Pot. How could it be? It is not a question, he says, that he knows the answer to. Throughout his life, he says, he has had to adapt to political regimes: Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and then the Khmer Rouge. He simply looks at me and says, “I survived as a cultivateur.” He says the word cultivateur in my native tongue matter-of-factly. Laborer: one more disguise in his life.

Later I hear from a Khmer friend that Kravel changed his name after the Pol Pot era. He put Tum, based on Romeo, in the middle of his name; Pich is a friend of Tum’s. His chosen last name, Kravel, means “earring.” The earring leaves a hole, so you can never forget, Kravel tells me later.

We are by the Mekong River, having dinner with a group of Khmer male academics. Beer girls flock around us, pleading with the host to buy their brand. I am sitting next to Kravel, with whom I have come to talk, and confess my sadness at seeing beautiful Miss Heineken and lovely Miss San Miguel with long, red promlike dresses and sashes. He simply says, “It’s for money.” Then he picks up his glass and looks at me seriously. “I ordered a Coke,” he says. He believes my play will help younger generations remember and understand. It creates a memory, he says, for Khmer people who will see it, enabling them to remember their own experiences. Some young people don’t even know about Pol Pot or believe their parents when they talk about the period from 1975 to 1979. It is a strange amnesia—a kind of anti-amnesia, I think to myself, because as much as some people want to erase the memory, it is there, perhaps even stronger because it is being resisted.

Even in his name, Pich Tum Kravel resists. He has become a new person and, as such, survives.
Why Did He Correct My Memory?

On the first day we meet in the red-curtained theater of the French Cultural Center, the actors slip off their shoes at the bottom of the stairs and we sit in a circle on the gray-carpeted stage. We go around the circle, saying our names. My interpreter, a visual artist who graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), translates for me as I tell the actors that I’ve been writing about Cambodia for ten years. My plays and oral-history work are passed around the circle, and the actors look at my writing.

Eleven of the actors and actresses are from Mao Keng’s National Theatre, the only professional troupe of modern-theater actors in Cambodia, a country in which there are virtually no contemporary plays produced. One actress is from RUFA, which before the war was a prestigious training center for Khmer performing arts but now lacks funds. Joining the project as an actor is Arn Chorn-Pond, a Khmer survivor, artist, and activist who divides his time between the large Cambodian community in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Cambodia. As we sit in the circle, I say to the actors that I have found, through the years, that I like to write what’s close to my heart. “If you were going to die tomorrow, what would you write?” I ask. Trying to convey my meaning through gestures as well as words, I say that it would be better if they act out their responses to my question rather than narrate them in the third person.

We break from the circle, and the actors take some time to have lunch and think about their responses. Around two, they come back, holding papers: some are folded into squares, some attached in notebooks, some have words all the way to the very edge, as if to save and not waste precious space. There is a kind of nervous hush. I sit next to my interpreter, Dom Nang Pin, whose mouth is very close to my ear. He feeds me the words in English in a furtive whisper as the first actor, Bunron, runs onstage, ducking, hiding behind a bush, calling, gesturing downward with his hands, urging his friend to hide. He unwraps some food from his krama, his scarf, then fearfully scans the area, stuffing his mouth, his being, his life. What is the food? I ask Dom.

Potatoes.

Bunron pounds his chest, gasping for air. His invisible friend tells him he will steal more potatoes that night. They look out at us, the audience. We are now armed guards with scythes, swords, knives, sickles. We sink down in our seats. Bunron tells his friend, “No, don’t go tonight. You stole today, they’ll kill you this time.” The invisible friend beside him says, “What does it matter? To die of starvation or by their blade?” Bunron makes a strong case for him not to go: he asks his friend, “Who will take care of your old mother?”

The friend goes to the field anyway. Bunron watches him. We watch Bunron. After the scene is over, he bows to us and makes his way down the
stairs. At the bottom, he puts his shoes back on. I get up from my seat and hug him. In Khmer culture, it is not customary for a woman like me to hug him, but he is gracious and accepts it. I tell him that I love him for what he has done with such beauty and courage. Dom translates. Bunron nods. He responds with the same gesture and expression he always will: one of accepting the inevitable—as if to say, “It had to be done. We had to do this play.” But I can see that it has cost him to recreate the story. Later that week, I ask him about it, and he says yes, it can give him a headache and bad dreams, but he wants to do it. He assures me and the others that he wants to do it.

Bunron chooses another National Theatre actor, his friend Kry Onn, to play the friend in the piece he has written. At a press conference for Khmer journalists twenty-seven days later, they perform the piece, “Because of Hunger,” as a preview of our performance. The press immediately asks, with a camera pointed at me, “Why the Khmer Rouge? Is this about the tribunal?” “It’s a play,” I say. “Theater.” The actors say the same.

After Bunron and Kry Onn perform, we take questions. One of the journalists in the audience says, “The Khmer Rouge did not have swords, they had bayonets.” Later in our circle, Bunron asks, puzzled, “Why did he correct my memory?” Bunron knows what he remembers. I say apologetically, “He probably wants to share his own story.” Bunron is an artist, a survivor of a regime that tried to annihilate artists, and now he can tell his story as an actor. The journalist does not seem to have had that opportunity.

**Lamentation of a Widow**

When she does her piece, it is as if I am watching a silent film, except that Prak Vanny whispers to herself. Later when we stage what she has written, she moves the actors around to match her memory of things; she directs them. She takes Chhouep Tang, the young man she has chosen to play her husband, by the shoulders and moves him to the place onstage where she wants him to be. What she does is recreate her piece—in rehearsals, in run-throughs—each and every time and with the same amount of dignity. It is a short piece, maybe two minutes, but by repeating it, she gives it the impact it clearly has for her: the moments leading up to the last time she saw her husband. She was wrapping rice in banana leaves, and there was a knock on the door; it was a Khmer Rouge officer. She is the oldest in the group, and it is eerie to see handsome Chhouep Tang play her husband; he is as young as her husband would have been at the time. Fitting that she chose him. I learn that she was once a playwright herself.

One actor is unsatisfied when Prak Vanny has finished performing her piece. He asks, “Shouldn’t you tell us onstage what happened to your husband?” I am surprised by his question because every movement she makes—from the moment she starts to wrap the rice in the banana leaves...
to the moment she leaves for work, miming putting the hoe over her shoulder—tells us what happened to her husband. There was never any doubt for most of us who watched Prak Vanny’s piece.

**Coming Home**

After the first day of watching the actors, I go home exhausted and get in bed. On TV is the film *Coming Home*, in Khmer with English subtitles. As I watch, I cry for what happened on this first day and for the actors’ bravery. I wait for the scene in which Jon Voight’s character makes love to Jane Fonda’s, but it has been cut. The movie rolls along, and I can hardly tell where the scene had appeared in the uncut version.

**Photographs**

Rithy Panh, the French-Khmer filmmaker, has chosen Than Nandoeun (Doeun), one of the National Theatre actors, to direct my short play, *Photographs from s-21*, and has cast the actress Ly as the Young Woman and Roeun Narith as the Young Man. Narith was the lead in one of Rithy’s recent films.

Doeun, Narith, and Ly make up their own group and decide to rehearse in the mornings in the French Cultural Center’s cinema theater, where we will have our performances. There are tensions surrounding how much they are getting paid, and they ask that I come up with more money for the four performances. The director at the Center agrees to raise the money, and we are able to pay the actors a better fee.

*Photographs* will be done in tandem with the actor-written pieces, collectively titled *Night Please Go Faster*, after Monika Yin’s piece. She has written about the flooding of her squatter hut and a prayer she makes to her missing parents.

In humid sunshine, the Khmer photographer Remissa Mak photographs Ly and Roeun Narith at Tuol Sleng, or s-21, the extermination center. He puts them in the poses of the two victims in my play. In one photograph, there is supposed to be a child’s hand reaching up to the Young Woman. I offer my hand for this purpose and lie on the ground as Remissa tells me how to clutch the bottom of Ly’s black skirt the way a child would. Doeun, the director, wants to blow up Remissa’s photos and use them as the set, explaining that the souls of the images will walk out of their frames as Ly and Narith.

There is almost no barrier for me when I listen to my script being read in Khmer. During rehearsals, I give my notes to Doeun through Dom, my interpreter. To me, the pace seems slow and the tone sometimes monotonous. My comments don’t seem to have much effect.

For my play, Doeun has created impressionistic light and sound that surprise and intrigue me. In retrospect, I see that they created a kind of theater that was more poetic and nonlinear than what I was used to in the
An actor himself, Doeun does the sound for the play by breathing into a microphone in a booth in the back of the theater. During the performances, the theater is quiet, and by the end of the play, it is completely silent except for sniffling. And when the lights come up, no one moves from his seat.

On the Saturday that *Photographs* and *Night* are to open in Phnom Penh, Vannath Chea, the woman whose house was built near Tuol Sleng, takes me to the pagoda where the ashes of the bones are kept. She and the other women in the Jeep tease me that I won’t make it back in time for the performance because the Jeep will break down and a lady walking on the side of the road, carrying four packages, a baby on her back, and a bundle balanced on her head, will have to take me in tow as well. Along the way, we see schools named after the prime minister; the one road that is paved leads to his private home. I see a helicopter in the distance, landing at his compound.

Along the road, pork is drying in the sun and a man pulls a cart piled high with cucumbers. There is a lushness to the green along the river. The older women wear skirts and walk barefoot—so fit, so graceful, their hair so naturally swept. People brush the dirt outside their homes with thatch brooms.

In Kandal Province, about an hour from Phnom Penh, the Jeep turns in to the pagoda, and after a few minutes, we find the monk who takes us to the altar where the ashes are kept in a marble urn. We pray to the urn. The monk says that when the bones were cremated, the flames sparked many colors and that the bones are special. He had a dream the night of the cremation that a doctor was giving him a shot. I ask if he thinks the bones had been those of a doctor, and he says yes, he thinks so. He tells us that he takes special care of the urn, making offerings every holy day, Saturday, and that he will not leave the pagoda because he does not want to leave the bones. I make an offering for the ashes in the urn and for the souls of those portrayed in the plays to be performed that night. Every night before their performance, Narith and Ly burn incense and pray to the two nameless victims they are playing.

When Rithy, the filmmaker, read *Photographs*, he asked me if I’d be interested in writing a play about Bophana, a female Tuol Sleng victim about whom he had made a documentary. Bophana was first written about by Elizabeth Becker, who devoted a chapter to her in her definitive book about Cambodia, *When the War Was Over*. I go to the archives at Tuol Sleng and find the dusty old box in which Bophana’s confessions are kept. I look at the absurd confessions she was forced to write in careful lettering and at the attentive archivist.

Yes, I say to Rithy, I want to write about Bophana. I discover she is almost a national heroine. So many know her strong face. She fought to her death, defying the Khmer Rouge leaders by writing love letters to her
husband, who was also killed at Tuol Sleng. When I meet Elizabeth Becker, she generously offers to let me see her translations of the documents.

A Khmer friend used the word unnecessary to describe the Pol Pot era. When he speaks of that time, of its perpetrators, he starts to laugh: it's a kind of helpless snicker, which I interpret to mean he associates Pol Pot with insanity and perhaps shame. He says he has never been to Tuol Sleng. Tourist buses unload at the gate, right in the middle of the city, and tourists flock in. At the entrance are photos of Pol Pot’s so-called clique, most of whom have escaped punishment. White flowers that drop from the trees cover the white tombs of victims who were found when Viet Nam invaded in 1979. A man selling tickets near the souvenir shop eats white turnips, which he dips in salt. Beggars wait at the gate for the tourists. When I go there, I ask my moto driver, Saly, to come in with me. He points out the photo of Sin Sisamouth, the famous singer who was killed then. He tells me what a great singer he was and takes me to buy one of Sin’s CDs.

Directing and Producing

Before each performance of Photographs and Night, I pull the stage’s red-velvet curtains so that they’re the same width on each side. I hang a black sheet over the backstage door that is ajar, and I turn on the air conditioner. I commiserate with the young Khmer man who keeps telling me the French-subtitle machine is broken and there is no one to fix it because it is the weekend. I am delighted when the machine is fixed by someone who happens to be standing nearby. I listen to audiotapes of frogs that sound like ducks; I persuade an actor that he should not play his melodramatic, audiotaped music during another actor’s piece. I remember Rithy being sensitive to the actors’ melodramatic style when he watched a rehearsal. I get someone to take down a banner welcoming lawyers to a convention being held in the theater during the day and someone else to re-hang the photographs for the set of my play. I make sure the door is open in the back of the theater so that Kry Onn won’t be locked out when he runs offstage during Bunron’s piece. I try to air out the theater a little so the smell of incense, which lingers after the actors have prayed, won’t be so strong. I repeat that we want Khmer music, not Charles Aznavour, before the show starts. I send the stage manager, Pok Dirama, to buy new batteries for Doeun’s microphone. I pay Ly for her wig. I smile at Ros Navy’s daughter, who plays herself in Ros’s piece about the time her daughter became very ill and a traditional Kru Khmer wanted to burn incense and pray rather than take her to the hospital. I pick up the trash in the theater and bathroom. I get the tickets from the French Cultural Center office, I take the money from the audience, I give out programs printed in Khmer, French, and English, and if the program is in English, I give the person a flashlight, enabling him or her to read the translated text in the dark. I try to encourage mothers with babies to take them outside if they start crying.
My favorite thing to do is watch the actors carry in plates of fruit when they arrive for performances two or three hours early, and to see them laugh at me because I am working so hard and seem so busy.

Saly

We arrive at Saly’s house at night, driving on his moto through a maze of squatter huts and over planked pathways built above a large sewer system. Most of the huts are open in the front and lit with candles, though occasionally one has electricity and a few have televisions. In the dark, the TV looms larger than life. As Saly parks and honks his horn, I realize that I have no way to know where we are or how we got there. At the doorway, we step over a board that blocks the entrance and keeps the baby from going outside. Saly’s one-room house is made of cardboard and planks. As I glance at some pictures of women singers, cut out of magazines and hung on the wall, he says, “We are very poor.” My heart is beating fast, and I am trying to smile as I nod. His wife, laughing, shows me their baby. I touch the baby’s cheek and he giggles; he looks like Saly, who is in his thirties but looks younger. The baby has a bandage on his navel, and I remember Saly telling me that he was at the hospital recently. Saly’s wife has a dazzling smile. In the glow of a kerosene lamp, we sit down on the floor. There is a mosquito coil nearby and some noodles Saly’s wife has prepared. Saly quickly shows me an English tape he has been using to learn the language. The baby is enjoying playing with the cassette tape, then Saly takes it away. I thank his wife for letting me have Saly as my driver every day. Saly translates, and she laughs and thanks me. I keep my eyes fixed on her beautiful, glowing face.

When he drives, Saly and I speak English and he asks me questions. He wonders if he can use the word “gentlewoman” the way he uses “gentleman.” I think about it, then say people usually don’t use the word “gentlewoman,” but I don’t see why he can’t. He says that I am a gentlewoman and that Laura, the woman who introduced us, is also a gentlewoman. Saly tells me in English that sometimes he is “not clever” and that he dreams with his eyes open. At night, he says shaking his head, he dreams and his eyes are open. He wants to talk to me about the Pol Pot era, but his English is not good enough. I assure him that it’s normal he dreams with his eyes open; he survived a bad war, and for the same reason, he may not always be able to think cleverly. And anyway, I say, “No one is clever all the time.” He thinks about this as he drives.

Laura and I help Saly buy a new house. This one is not above the sewer water of the squatters’ village. It’s made of wood and thatch and has some running water, electricity, and primitive toilet facilities. It is better, Saly agrees. I see that he has pinned up a poster I gave him of an Angkor art exhibit. He goes to all the rehearsals of my play and works putting up posters, buying water and bread for the actors, and sharing any comments.
he has about the show. When it rains, he hangs some of the wet posters on
the theater seats to dry. Near the end of the rehearsal period, he shows up
with three circles on his forehead from cupping: he says his wife has given
him a treatment because he hasn’t been feeling well. On opening night, we
rush to the change shop to get change for the bills I will pay the actors with.
He is happy when the shopkeeper charges no fee for giving us change. In
the glass case below the woman are bills from many different countries,
placed in small stacks and bound with rubber bands.
On the moto going to the theater, Saly says he won’t be going to opening
night. Since I had invited him long ago, I ask him why, and he says he
must go home, that the air conditioning makes him sick. I take a deep
breath. I touch his shoulder and say, “Saly, I want you to be there tonight.
You should come.” He nods and says he will. After the performance, when
he sees that all went well and the audience was pleased, he admits he is
relieved. As we drive home, he tells me that he wasn’t sure if the perform-
ance would be good. He was afraid some actors wouldn’t be good, he
admits, and he didn’t know if the audience would like the show. Now, he
says, he knows it is good and he is very happy.

The Dump

As the path narrows, Saly and I start to smell smoke, see more
trash, a naked person walking in a daze, and some scrawny dogs. He lets
me off to walk into the dump on foot. To the horizon in every direction is
trash, with smoke from burning waste rising in the haze of dawn. Before
they go scavenging through the trash to make money for their families,
children line up to get breakfast from a French nongovernmental organi-
zation (NGO). A nurse treats a man who has lifted up his pant leg to show
her the bloody side of his calf and ankle, lacerated by metal in the dump. A
little girl holds a baby and scrutinizes me. Also scrutinizing me are Saly and
two other moto drivers, Heng and Kim. They have accompanied Laura
and me; Laura runs her own NGO, Global Children. Some kids joke with
each other as they wait in line for their food. In the dump itself are older
women who have kramas wrapped around their heads and search through
trash with a pick, just steps behind a bulldozer rotating the trash. The scav-
engers look for anything they can melt, recycle, collect to get a few pennies.
People live in makeshift huts on top of the trash. It’s morning time, and a
mother is cooking soup for her family; I can see the steam rising from the
rice. As if on their way to school, children with backpacks make their way
through the dump. They have an air of simple necessity, like the ones I
usually notice playing badminton on the side of the road.

Kim drives me away from the dump. He says he thought his life was
bad, but seeing this makes it seem better. As we wend our way through
clusters of huts, my cell phone rings and we stop so that I can answer it.
When I finish talking, I see two young boys running towards me, holding a
plastic, pink toy phone and saying into the receiver in English, “Hello? Hello?” They laugh with glee.

Never Again

Shortly after I return to the United States from Cambodia, I am introduced to a Khmer man who has received a human-rights fellowship from Columbia University and works for LICADHO. He and I sit on a couch in the beautiful, plush lobby of Columbia International House. He keeps returning to the Pol Pot era, saying, “But you want to know what happened to me…” The first few times he says it, I kindly reply, “No, that’s all right. I don’t need to hear…” When he continues to say, “You want to know what happened,” I finally nod and listen to the story of how he survived Pol Pot. We talk about the fact that the prime minister has the ultimate and only power in the country. And I remember what a Vietnamese artist told me: “Cambodians want peace at any price.” I say goodbye to the man, and he gives me his e-mail address. He says he will be starting a program protesting torture. As I walk home, I renew my commitment.

Youk Chhang, the young director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, says a human soul cannot be destroyed. He is neither scholar nor lawyer, merely a collector of pieces of paper, he says. At the end of all his e-mail messages, he has searching for the truth! below his name.

Before my trip, my father had sent me a poem by José-Maria de Heredia about travelers who

Watch in unknown skies, rising from the deep:
Stars they’d never seen before.

There are stars. Precious gems to chart the way. Searching for the truth.
River of a Thousand Lingas,
Kbal Spean, 2002
Photograph by Richard Murai