A Cambodian Odyssey

Haing Ngor did not think of himself as a thespian; he was a medical doctor hardly accustomed to the sybaritic trappings of the rich and well known. Yet, there he was at the fifty-seventh annual Academy Awards holding an Oscar for best supporting actor in The Killing Fields, a film showing the apocalyptic events of the late 1970s in his native Cambodia. The concatenation of circumstances that had brought him to the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion would itself have made a film to strain any moviegoer’s credulity. It’s not surprising, therefore, that when asked by a reporter afterward how he felt, Dr. Ngor was unable to answer immediately.

Ten years before, in 1975, he had been a successful physician in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Dr. Ngor, because of his family’s wealth and his own ample income, was removed from the civil war that had raged in the countryside for the past five years between the guerilla leader Pol Pot’s communist Khmer Rouge rebels and the government forces.

Dr. Ngor’s insouciance was shattered on April 17, 1975, when he heard the staccato sounds of gunfire coming from within his hospital. Suddenly, Khmer Rouge rebels burst into the operating theater, and one fighter, no more than twelve years old, pointed a gun at his head and demanded, “You doctor?” Pol Pot had decreed that every educated Cambodian must die in order to bring a new Cambodia into existence. Dr. Ngor shook his head and said that the doctor had fled. By doing so he saved his life, but the unconscious patient was left to die.

What followed defies belief. Pol Pot’s minions, often children barely in their teens armed with automatic weapons, went on a killing spree. The people of Phnom Penh were driven from their homes and into the countryside to work as slave laborers. Private property was abolished and all ownership records were destroyed. People were killed for the slightest infraction of Communist party rules. Dr. Ngor was captured and later sentenced to death for addressing his fiancée Chang My Huoy as “sweetheart” instead of “comrade lady” and again for “counter-revolutionary activity” (eating leaves he had picked). He survived because his captors simply forgot about him or were too lazy to carry out the sentences. He spent months in a fetid prison where he was repeatedly tortured but was one day released with no explanation. His parents and other family members disappeared without a trace, and Chang My Huoy died of starvation in his arms on June 2, 1978.

Pol Pot’s sanguinary rule ended in 1979 when Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia, defeated the Khmer Rouge, and drove its leader into exile. Mass executions and famine had killed three million Cambodians. Of the country’s five hundred doctors, fewer than fifty survived, among them Dr. Ngor. In the confusion that followed the Vietnamese invasion, he escaped to Thailand and from there made his way to the United States.
Unable to practice medicine, he did relief work among the Cambodian expatriate community in Los Angeles. It was there that he was spotted by a casting director for a movie being made about the Cambodian holocaust. He portrayed Dith Pran, a Cambodian interpreter for New York Times correspondent Sydney Schanberg, author of the book about Cambodia on which the movie was based. The verisimilitude of the film was affirmed by Dr. Ngor and Dith Pran, whose experiences in Cambodia had been remarkably similar. It had an extraordinary effect on those who saw it, opening their eyes for the first time to the horrors of Pol Pot’s regime.

Winning the Oscar had given Dr. Ngor a unique opportunity to tell the world of the agony that had convulsed his country, and he later wrote a book about his experiences. But when he looked at the reporter who asked the question after the Academy Awards presentation, all he could say in reply was, “You ask me, ‘Doctor, how do you feel?’ Such pain I have you cannot imagine.”

Then in 1996, in a terrible final irony, Haing Ngor, a survivor of the killing fields of Cambodia, became the murder victim of a gang, thought by many to be high on crack cocaine, outside his Los Angeles apartment. Robbery was the motive, and the three men were later convicted and received long prison sentences. By a curious coincidence, the day that the three separate juries returned their verdicts was also the day that Cambodia announced the death of Pol Pot.

Answer each question in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a word from the lesson, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. How would you describe the values of most of the people gathered at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion?

2. Did Dr. Ngor’s privileged position allow him to block out the pain of his fellow Cambodians? Explain your answer.

3. What began the concatenation that cost Dr. Ngor his privileged status?

4. What did Hitler and Pol Pot have in common?

5. How did Pol Pot govern when he controlled Cambodia?
6. What do World War II and Pol Pot’s rule over Cambodia have in common?
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7. How did Dr. Ngor recognize the sound of machine gun fire?
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8. Under Pol Pot, what kinds of offenses brought the death penalty?
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9. What would be an effect of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in the prisons?
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10. What helped Dr. Ngor feel at home in Los Angeles?
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11. How did Dr. Ngor become a *thespian*?
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12. What encomium did Dr. Ngor and Dith Pran give the movie?
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The original meaning of **holocaust**, from the Greek *holokausten*, “completely burned,” comes from biblical references to the religious sacrifice of animals burned on an altar. In the seventeenth century, the meaning broadened to “wholesale destruction by fire.” In the twentieth century, **Holocaust** came to mean “the wholesale destruction of a people,” referring to the murder of millions of Jews and others by the Nazis during World War II. In this meaning, the word is capitalized to emphasize the significance of that crime against humanity.

**Sybaris**, one of the first Greek colonies, was established in southern Italy around 800 B.C.E. The soil was fertile, and the people of Sybaris became wealthy and enjoyed lives of ease and indolence. According to legend, the Sybarites indulged in pleasure to such a degree that when the city was attacked by neighboring Crotona in 510 B.C.E., they were unable to defend themselves. They perished, and their city was destroyed. The Greeks preserved the term **sybarite**, perhaps as a warning, and it has passed unchanged into English.

**Drama** as we know it began in ancient Athens when a person stood apart from the chorus and engaged in dialogue with it. This was the first actor, reputed to have been **Thespis**, a Greek dramatist who lived in the sixth century B.C.E. His contribution to theater is acknowledged in our word **thespian**, “an actor.”