

Barnaby Hall

The master dancer Em Theay rehearsing at the temples of Angkor in Cambodia.

Making Dance of the Killing Fields

By ROBERT TURNBULL

OVER the last century, theater has been on the front line in the effort to heal society's deepest traumas. But as yet it has found few ways of exorcising the genocidal horrors perpetrated by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge on the people of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. "Continuum — Beyond the Killing Fields," which will play at the New Theater on Chapel Street at Yale University from Wednesday through Saturday as part of the Festival of Arts and Ideas, aims to remedy this situation by bringing the creative process into the heart of the country's recent history.

Devised by Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of Singapore's Theatreworks, and rehearsed within Cambodia's ancient Angkor temple complex, "Continuum" tells the chilling stories — in spoken, sung and danced drama — of how three classical

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In 'Continuum,'

Cambodian artists put on stage their own chilling stories of survival.

dancers and a shadow puppeteer survived Khmer Rouge labor camps in Battambang Province. In October, the piece will go to Robertson Quay in Singapore and next year to Phnom Penh for performances expected to be held in Tuol Sieng, the regime's infamous detention and torture center, now a genocide museum.

A former law student turned director, Mr. Ong, 37, approached the project tentatively, unsure how readily participants would share their experiences with him, let alone with the public at large. "In coping with everyday life, Cambodians have tended to bury their most painful memories, and many are disturbed at seeing members of the old Khmer Rouge elite readmitted to government," he said. "But there was no question in my mind that tracing these

memories helped each dancer to overcome some of the trauma."

Rehearsals came uncomfortably close to group therapy, although any suspicion of voyeurism was dispelled by a growing sense of mutual trust. Tears streamed down faces as performers recalled lost friends and family, illustrating their past lives with snatches of dance and song. As part of the exercise, three of the group returned to Battambang. Few traces of the labor camps remained, yet each pilgrim was able to find the exact locations of the former sites. In what Mr. Ong describes as "shattering scenes," the dancers rediscovered old friends and acquaintances still living in the neighborhood.

The central figure in the piece is Em Theay, a handsome, silver-haired 69-year-old master dancer who once entertained President Richard Nixon in the United States and whose life today is committed to rebuilding Cambodia's cultural heritage following the decimation of much of the classical repertory.

Ordered into a remote and alien environment after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, Em Theay survived, paradoxically, because her village chief enjoyed her dancing.

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At the fall of the regime in 1979 she walked 170 miles back to Phnom Penh barefoot.

Her three sisters, also dancers, died along with most of her seven children.

Joining Em Theay at Yale will be her surviving daughter, Thong Kim Ann, and a former student, Bun Thom, both of whom have devoted their lives to passing down their skills to a younger generation at Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts. Kim Ann's husband was arrested and executed in 1976 as a result of her pleading with the village chief not to separate them.

Bun Thom was due to marry a Khmer Rouge cadet in one of the regime's ritual mass weddings until her present husband volunteered to marry her. She subsequently decided to terminate a pregnancy rather than bring a child into a world of grinding destitution. Of her extended family of 40, only four returned from the camps. Telling her story in a dramatic context has, she said, helped her "build a better sense of peace within myself."

The only man in the group, the shadow puppeteer Mann Kosal, spent much of his time on the run, hiding in forests and scavenging for food for his ailing mother. During the 80's he started making the Cambodian form of large leather shadow puppets (sbeik thom), creating a life for himself with his bare hands.

Intent on dramatizing these moving stories in an appropriately epic style, Mr. Ong has deftly interwoven personal narrative with Cambodian traditional dance and shadow puppetry. Short video sequences by the Singapore video artist Noorlinah Mohamed illustrate each dancer's current life and are punctuated by an electronic soundtrack by the Japanese sound artist Yen.

The mix and match of media is not, Mr. Ong insists, an attempt at post-modernism or "anything too intellectual," but is born of a desire "to create something multilayered in meaning but simple and minimal in

production and design."

Sections of the "Reamker," the Cambodian classical dance version of the Indian epic "The Ramayana," are featured strongly in "Continuum." But what Mr. Ong hopes will elevate the piece into the realm of the mythic and metaphorical is the introduction of new sets of leather puppets depicting a wide range of symbols and ideas on death, suffering and spiritual cleansing.

It's a radical move: until now the larger puppets have been reserved exclusively for telling the "Ramayana" story. Mr. Ong takes the view that sbeik thom is perhaps unique among Asian dramatic forms in being able to impart contemporary as well as ancient myths, and he is determined to stimulate its evolution. "It's important to empower people to believe that legends need not only be passed down through the ages, as it were from 'on high,'" he said. "Modern myths can emerge from ordinary people."

Since becoming artistic director of

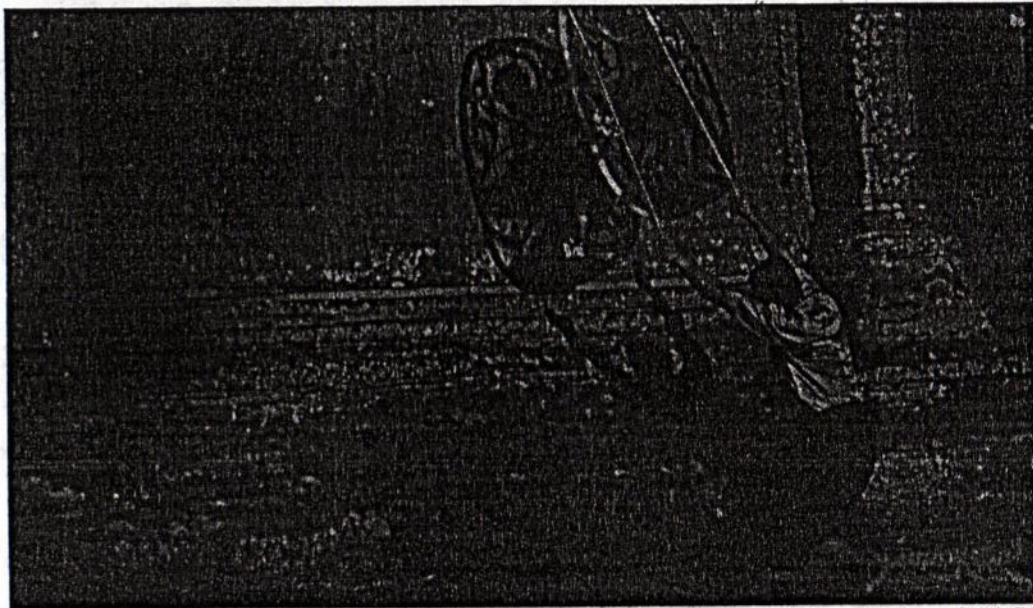
Theatreworks in 1985, Mr. Ong has traveled extensively throughout Asia, exploring the links as well as the paradoxes among Asian cultures. "The more consumerism takes over our city centers, the more the traditional arts have been relegated to the domain of universities and religious institutions," he said ruefully. "I don't think the average man in the street feels much of a connection with traditional culture."

IN Cambodia, the kind of urbanization characteristic of wealthier Thailand was arrested by Pol Pot's experiment. When the news emerged that 90 percent of artists died during the conflicts, Unesco, the Toyota Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council and other donor organizations initiated programs to identify survivors and encourage the revival of the country's 20-odd performance disciplines. Here Mr. Ong sees some grounds for optimism. "Now that there seems to be a more lasting peace in Southeast

Asia, we are in a better position to start to preserve what is being threatened," he said.

"Continuum" comes at a time when Cambodia is locked in a fierce debate about just how to bring about retribution for the crimes of that period. A United Nations-sponsored court has been proposed for later this year, but it has been 25 years since the regime fell and, as yet, not a single person has been brought to justice.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ong has gathered enough personal evidence to convince him that the arts can play a significant role in the healing process. "These are real-life events," he said, "dressed up in such a way that they can be retold again and again, not only for those who remember them but for all of humanity. The horrors of the Khmer Rouge belong to the world: they act as a grim reminder of depravity that we can ill afford to forget."



The puppeteer Mann Kosal rehearsing with shadow puppets at the temples of Angkor in Cambodia.

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