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Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s):

The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields by Ong Keng Sen

Source: *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 393-395

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124332>

Accessed: 06/03/2009 09:37

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## Performance Review

**THE CONTINUUM: BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS.** By TheatreWorks. Conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen. International Festival of Arts and Ideas, New Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut. June 30, 2001.

*The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*, a project produced by the Singapore company TheatreWorks and directed by Ong Keng Sen, had its world premiere at the Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, Connecticut, in June 2001. The piece is a moving exploration of the ability of traditional art forms to speak to new realities. *Continuum* is part documentary and part experimental performance about Cambodia's recent past and the process of four Cambodians using their art to come to terms with that past today. Between one and two million Cambodians died from execution, torture, illness, or starvation during Pol Pot's three-and-a-half-year rule (1975–1979). The regime targeted performing artists in particular because of their association with the court, and only 10 percent of them survived. These few survivors have spent the last two decades piecing together the remnants of their performance traditions and passing them on to the next generation. *The Continuum* weaves together stories of life and death under Pol Pot as told by three classical dancers and one shadow puppeteer with excerpts from the classical Cambodian dance repertoire, dance training exercises, shadow puppetry, evocative music by Japanese musician and composer Yen Chang, and documentary video by Noorlinah Mohd. The performance features the extraordinary artistry of master dancer Em Theay, her daughter Thong Kim Ann, principal dancer for the Royal Government of Cambodia Kim Bun Thom, and shadow puppeteer Mann Kosal.

The piece centers on the performer and teacher Em Theay, who at age

sixty-nine dances with the grace of a twenty-year-old and the pure joy of a child as she reprises the classical dances she performed in the palace as a young woman, as well as songs she sang for children at a children's community during the Pol Pot regime. These dances and songs punctuate the emotional stories she tells about her past—the death of two of her children and the loss of three hundred friends from the world of performance to the Cambodian genocide. Her gentle movements and lively spirit evoke the lost courtly world in which she grew up.

*Continuum* opens with a video of Em Theay and her students performing a *sampeah kru*, a ritual honoring deities, spirits, and teachers that is often enacted by dancers before they undertake a new project or learn a new role. Em Theay insisted on having this ceremony before beginning her work on the piece, and the video introduces us to her in her home environment where she is a gentle, wise matriarch surrounded by devoted students. She seems to be ubiquitous: correcting dance postures, keeping time by clapping her hands, and preparing religious offerings. Her students rely on her as their link to a lost past, and she is a role model for them in her dancing, her adherence to traditional practices, and her love of dance. At the end of *Continuum* she tells the audience that, although she is retired, she continues to teach because she loves her culture and her art, which, she says, is the spirit of her nation.

The video sequences project images of Cambodia today and teach about the art forms demonstrated in the production and the political past. They also interrelate effectively with the stage action. At one point, video images of a young Cambodian slaughtering and skinning a cow follow some of the onstage accounts of the performers' harsh experiences under Pol Pot. The audience inevitably links the flesh being torn apart on screen to Pol Pot's genocide. This video image, however, is simply the prelude to what turns out to be a fairly humorous report on the steps that go into creating a leather shadow puppet, the first step being "get a cowhide." At another point, Em Theay and her daughter talk onstage about a close friend of the teacher—a friend who was killed at the infamous torture and execution center, Toul Sleng. The video that follows shows the company's trip to Toul Sleng, now a genocide museum. Em Theay, with the help of the others, looks through the archives to try to identify a photograph of her friend that she had seen in the museum years before. Hundreds of photographs of people who were executed at Toul Sleng go by the screen as the ultimately unsuccessful search proceeds.

The live action onstage breaks new ground in its use of the traditional forms of classical dance and puppetry in a nontraditional context. The leather puppets from the *sbaek thom*, or large shadow puppet tradition, are used here for the first time in a theatrical piece that is not a telling of the *Reamker*, Cambodia's version of the *Ramayana*. Mann Kosal created some new puppets for this piece, and their images reflect modern Cambodia rather than ancient myth. Despite the modern images, Kosal manipulates the large, flat, richly painted leather puppets in the same way as he would traditional puppets: holding them by two sticks, one held in each hand, with deeply bent knees, he dances them across both the front and rear of a backlit cloth. One of the pup-

pet images self-reflectively depicts a puppeteer manipulating the puppet of a paunchy man who recounts how, as the thirteenth child of a middle-class journalist, he was given away to be a servant to another family. The story is, presumably, from the puppeteer Mann Kosal's own childhood memory. Other puppets show Cambodians surrounded or chased by figures, Pol Pot's demons who are now their own.

Kosal also uses some traditional puppets, and throughout the piece both classical dance and traditional puppetry are set up so that the audience reads them in relation to personal stories and historical events. Two dancers, one playing the giant role and one playing the male role, go through a training exercise in which they display the dance gesture sequences used for conveying different emotions. Kim Bun Thom, dancing the giant, tells the story of how she aborted her baby when she and her husband decided it would be too difficult to raise it under Pol Pot. As she dances the giant's stylized gestures for "love," "joy," "anger," and "sorrow," she performs her own varied responses to this emotional memory. Later, a classical dance battle sequence from the *Reamker* also evokes recent political struggles and juxtaposes the situations of victor and vanquished.

The director allows the audience to hear the beautiful lilt of the Cambodian language throughout. The production includes a translation in a printed text handed out to the spectators beforehand. For Em Theay's performance alone, a young woman translator onstage listens respectfully and then offers an English version to the audience.

This rich and resonant performance, the product of the company's emotional journey, helps a non-Cambodian audience to sympathize with the performers' hardships, which are shared in one way or another by almost all their compatriots, and fosters a deep appreciation of the Cambodian performing arts. The company's hope is to take the piece back to Cambodia where it might serve in the nation's ongoing struggle to address a painful past, one which many fear may be erased before Cambodia fully confronts it.

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