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Movie In Focus: New Year Baby Rtefugee Film Week Programme French Cultural Centre, Street 218

A documentary about a Khmer woman's search for her own family's identity is showing at the Refugee Film Festival this June. Will Koenig talked with the film's director, Socheata Poeuv.

Twenty-five years after Socheata Poeuv's family fled Cambodia for the United States, her parents gathered their four children together to reveal truths they had never talked about before.

Her two sisters, she discovered, were actually her cousins, and had been orphaned during the Khmer Rouge's rule. Her older brother was her half-brother – his father and sister had also been killed by the Khmer Rouge. She also learned that her parents' marriage had been arranged by the Khmer Rouge, and that as the genocidal regime crumbled, her mother decided to take what was left of her family and flee to Thailand.



Socheata Poeuv:Creating closure

Socheata, who had worked for four years in the news departments of U.S. television networks ABC and NBC, decided to tell the story of her family's escape, her parents' courage and what they went through to find freedom.

Back to the Future

Her parents' revelation provided the catalyst to travel to Cambodia and make her personal documentary, named New Year Baby after her propitious birth on the first day of the new year in a Thai refugee camp, marking the start of a new life for her family. But the bare bones story her parents offered had provided more questions than answers. She began adding more detail to the story her parents had sketched out.

While her parents' marriage was forced, they decided to stay together and are still married today. Socheata says her mother was committed to bringing her family to Thailand, but knew she couldn't do it alone. She needed to find her two nieces, assigned to a children's camp somewhere in the country, and care for her sick young son. So her newly assigned husband agreed to help his wife to escape, and he got the family he had always wanted.

Over two trips to Cambodia she delved deeper into her family's history. On the first trip in September 2003, she accompanied her family as they returned to Phnom Penh, where her mother's family originated from. They also visited members of their extended family in Battambang, Siem Reap, and Kandal province. Back in Cambodia, Socheata's brother met his dead father's family and





saw pictures of him for the first time.

The second time in January 2005, Socheata focused on filming the story of her family's escape. She found the children's camp where her sisters née cousins had been sent after being taken from their parents. She visited the camp where her mother and brother had barely survived. She followed her family's flight to the Thai-Cambodian border, where a generation before her father had carried her brother, then a little boy too sick to walk.

And finally she came to the now empty refugee camp where she was born and her family spent a year-and-a-half waiting to immigrate.

Joy. Love. Pardon.

Her parents were not happy about her desire to create a film about their life. They had done everything they could to keep their pain and loss secret, never discussing what had happened before immigrating to the United States. They had kept their children close, never letting them out of the house except for legitimate school-related reasons. They did not want their children digging up painful memories.

But later, as her parents saw audiences react to the film with gratitude and love for them and their actions, their feelings changed. They began to feel good about the film and their life in general.

"The audience helped them feel really honoured," Socheata says.

Small and quiet

New Year Baby was shot for about US\$350,000, a small budget for a film, according to Socheata. She estimates there were at least US\$500,000 of in-kind donations, including people who worked on the film for below market wage. Her office space and various legal services were also donated.

Several screenings of the film around the world have brought the movie acclaim at film festivals. She has also organized limited screenings in the U.S. for Khmer-Americans, and two screenings in Cambodia for the NGO community and English-speaking Cambodians.

At the moment, the movie is in English, though she is seeking funds to develop a Khmer-language version of the film. This would require hiring actors in Cambodia, recording their voices in local studios, and remixing the audio in Los Angeles. It is a challenge, but not one that puts off this determined woman.

Now promoting the movie full-time, she is planning a limited cinema release in the United States so the film can qualify for the Academy Awards. Who knows maybe she will even pick up an Oscar?

Information

Film:

New Year Baby

Tagline:

Joy. Love. Pardon.

Synopsis:

A documentary about a young woman's search to reveal the heroism and love of her family as they escaped the Khmer Rouge's genocide to start a new life.

Awards:

Winner of Amnesty International's 'Movies that Matter' Human Rights Award.

Winner of Best Documentary at the 25th Annual San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival.

Winner of Best Documentary at the AFI Dallas International Film Festival.