

THE TENTH DANCER

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PRINCIPAL PRODUCTION CREDITS

Writer and Director Sally Ingleton

Producers Sally Ingleton
Denise Patience

Executive Producer for the BBC	Alan Bookbinder
Executive Producer for the ABC	Harry Bardwell
Executive Producer for IBT	Paddy Coulter

Cinematography	Jenni Meaney
Film Editor	Ken Sallows
Sound	Paul Finlay, Dean Gawen, Ronnie Reinhard
Original Music	Paul Schutze

16mm. 52 minutes

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THE TENTH DANCER

SYNOPSIS

Under the brutal regime of Pol Pot over ninety percent of Cambodia's artists were killed, including most of the classical dancers of the Royal Court Ballet.

Only one in ten survived.

This is the story of **the tenth dancer**.

After Pol Pot was overthrown, Em Theay now the Head teacher of the National Dance Company, returned to Phnom Penh to help rebuild the troupe. There she met up with her former student Sok Chea, whom she then trained to become one of the principal dancers in the company.

THE TENTH DANCER is an intimate portrait of the relationship between a teacher and her pupil set against the backdrop of war torn Cambodia. The film weaves between the past and the present, memory and dream, to reveal a story of human dignity and survival.

As EmTheay prepares her dancers for the Cambodian New Year celebrations - a time when respect is paid to the gods and one's ancestors, the dancers remember the New Year of 1975 when Pol Pot seized power and the story of the killing fields began.

'Under Pol Pot we were all without hope. We thought we wouldn't be able to come back. Now it's as if the flame is back. Before, during the Pol Pot time it had been

extinguished. I had no energy to create the movements. It seemed like I was in a dream. Now I have the light to live. Just like a tree that is coming into bud and beginning to blossom.' **Em Theay**

The Tenth Dancer was made by Australian filmmaker Sally Ingleton.

Produced on 16mm with a duration of 52:00. It is in Cambodian language with English subtitles.

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HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

The filmmaker Sally Ingleton first visited Cambodia in November 1989 to investigate the possibility of producing a film about the rebuilding of the ancient Cambodian dance.

Further research was undertaken in 1990-91 with financial support provided by several non government aid organisations and Australian film funding bodies.

In Phnom Penh a strong trusting relationship was established with the key dancers in the story as well as with Cambodian government and cultural authorities.

The film was pre sold to the BBC and ABC TV and filming took place during Cambodian New Year in April/May 1992. The film was completed in 1993.

INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKER SALLY INGLETON

How did the idea for THE TENTH DANCER come about?

In the late 70's I worked as a teacher and a community worker and was involved in teaching Cambodian kids. I started to hear stories about what happened to these kids during the Pol Pot time and in the refugee camps. So, in 1989, I was planning a holiday to Vietnam and Cambodia and was talking to a friend about the country. He told me how 90% of all the artists had been killed during the Pol Pot time and how they were trying to rebuild their culture. He had heard about how they had established a dance school and were teaching young kids how to dance again. At the time I thought this would make a wonderful story of how a country recovers from the experience of war and genocide and starts to rebuild the spirit that's been knocked out of people. When I was in Cambodia I made a few enquiries about the dance school. On my last night there, I went to a performance of the dancers and was just transfixed by watching them perform. I decided that if there was a possibility of making this film - I would do it.

It took the next two years to get the film financed and sometimes the thought of going to Cambodia to make a film in another language was quite terrifying - I felt I was mad, but at the same time the story had gripped me in some way, I couldn't let it go.

One of the strongest things for me about the story of these two women was how the experience of war affects people. It is an attempt to crush the spirit, not only the human spirit but the spirit of past, memory, ancestors and their relationship with the gods - all these things are incredibly important to these people, and are equally as important to us in the western world - although often we don't realise it. They had been scarred by the experience of war, emotionally scarred and quite traumatised, and I could see that by trying to rebuild this dance troupe it was like they were healing themselves. They were trying to find the spirit inside themselves that they had lost - and in a way it was a metaphor for the country and how the country had been damaged - not only by the Pol Pot time but by decades of war starting from when the Americans had bombed Cambodia. People do get badly damaged, and I wanted to show that, show how it affects people but at the same time reveal that somewhere inside there is a strength, the flame is still alive and if you nurture it, people can come back.

Those dancers will never be the same. The dance will never be the same - with all its magic and splendour. What's there now is something quite different, the old woman, Em Theay represents that. She is a real tower of strength and is quite resolved in many ways about her past. The younger woman, Sok Chea, is still haunted by her experiences during the war. She is still in a degree of pain, whereas Em Theay has let go of it. All that she is thinking about is hanging onto the culture and impressing it into others so that something will be there when she dies.

How do the dance sequences work within the framework of the film?

I have never seen this as a film about dance. It is a film about people. In a way the dance is a metaphor for their experience of rebuilding their identity and their spirit. Dance is a perfect visual way of showing that happening. I deliberately pulled back on the dance sequences and tried to show the dance in quite measured places in the film - balanced with everyday life and archival footage.

Why did you tell the story using a non-linear structure?

I felt if I had told the story in a chronological order it would have lost a degree of intimacy with the characters and potential drama. When you first meet someone and talk to them, the sense of that person slowly emerges. That is the way I tried to let the story unfold. I held back conveying what had happened to them during Pol Pot to much later in the film when the audience would know them better and when these experiences would have greater impact.

I think memory is often neglected in documentary and it can be quite hard to capture. I think the film succeeds in weaving the story telling, incorporating memory and dreams. I like that visual movement between what is in the past and the present, memory and dreams. Ultimately we are pulled into their lives and experiences.

Can you talk a little about the two main characters?

They are both very strong women - but quite different. Em Theay is now in her 60's, she has been a mother of 18 children and has numerous grandchildren. At the time of filming she lived in a large block of flats where most of the artists in Phnom Penh lived - under very poor conditions with no electricity or running water. She is a remarkable human being with a wonderful sense of humour, resilience, strength and amazing inner beauty. When she walks in the room you really feel her presence. There was a noticeable difference when she wasn't at rehearsals. All the dancers would just be lazing around painting their fingernails but when she came in she would whip them into shape. She was always pushing them to their limits which I admired very much. Cambodia is a very hard country to live in in so many ways. To meet someone who is always trying to get the best out of people is very inspiring.

Sok Chea is very different, but also very strong. She has three young children and works hard as a dancer. But she is in conflict - she says:

'If I stay a dancer I am always going to be poor, I am never going to have any money and yet this is the only thing I know how to do.'

Part of her wants to be rich, to have a car and live in a nice house. She is haunted by her past, she suffers from nightmares and not a day goes by where she does not think about how her family died, it's always there.

How has the film affected you personally?

Making the film has been three years work and ultimately - a journey. It was something I really wanted to do and it became a case of believing in myself and trusting my intuition that the film would happen. I just had to stay on the path and make it happen - that was a very enriching experience.

What do you hope the film will achieve?

I hope that when people see the film they will be moved by it, that they will be drawn into the experiences of these two women and feel something for their lives. If the film manages to touch people and shift their emotions around a bit I'll feel like it is a success. For that is what the experience of getting to know Cambodia and its people has been like for me.

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS

THE TENTH DANCER has screened at the following international film festivals:

1993

Cinema Du Reel, Paris
Creteil International Women's Festival Paris
Los Angeles Asia Pacific Festival
Melbourne Film Festival
Jerusalem Film Festival
Helsinki Film Festival
Margaret Mead Film Festival New York
Chicago Film Festival
Hawaii International Film Festival

1994

Asian TV Festival, Japan
Berkeley Women's Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
Singapore Film Festival

1995

Film Forum Freiburg, Germany

AWARDS

Silver Plaque Chicago International Film Festival
Nominated for Best Documentary Hawaii Film Festival
Honourable Mention Asian TV Festival, Japan
Winner Golden Gate Award: Best Art Film, San Francisco International Film Festival
BEST DOCUMENTARY 1994 Australian Teachers Of Media Award (ATOM)

THE DANCERS

Today the **National Dance Company of Cambodia** has about 60 members who perform classical and folk dance.

The classical dance is mainly performed by women who play both the male and female roles as well as the masked role of the 'giant'. Men play the masked role of the monkey, seen in the Ramayana story. Both men and women perform equally in the less spectacular folk dance.

The dancers rehearse twice a day, six days a week and are paid a monthly salary by the State of about US\$15. They do occasional performances for tourists and foreign dignitaries for which they are paid extra. Several are forced to take outside jobs to earn enough money to survive.

Many of today's members were students or relatives of the Royal Ballet before the Pol Pot Regime.

Em Theay is the Head teacher of the Company in Phnom Penh. At 62 years of age she has twinkling eyes, a wicked laugh and a toothless grin. As one of the few survivors of the Royal Ballet, she has a remarkable memory for all the steps, songs and costume designs of the classical dance.

As a child she grew up in the Palace grounds because her parents were servants for the King and Queen.

Every New Year we would dance for her (the Queen). She would have a party and give us all noodle soup so everyone wanted to dance well. It was as if the spirits lived inside us and guided us to remember.

They selected me to take the Giant's role because I was dark skinned. Dark round and fat. For the female roles they wanted someone who was tall, slim, lightskinned and pretty. I was dark, but the Giant wore a mask, so it was okay.

She had 18 children, though not all survived. 10 died before the Pol Pot period - many as babies, 3 died during Pol Pot and the 5 left are now all artists. Each morning she rises and helps her grandchildren do their dance exercises. She then walks to the theatre to begin rehearsal. On the way she stops and jokes with stallholders who sell her a breakfast of noodle soup.

Once at rehearsal the jokes stop and the task of remembering dance steps begins. She offers prayers to the spirits of the old dance teachers, then with a hand clap, her troupe of dancers begin. Following them from behind she pinches flesh and prods muscles to help form the correct postures. All the time she sings out the narratives in old language long forgotten by those who dance before her now. The words to these songs were recorded in precious notebooks which Em Theay carried with her for the entire Pol Pot period. She hid and protected them at great risk to her own life because she knew their culture must survive. Even so, much was lost.

Now, I regret that I know so much. For example, I can sing and dance but my students have yet to learn all these things. I'm afraid that when I die everything will

just go.....they don't understand the real meaning of the dances, they don't yet have the spirit in their bodies. They have no fire inside them to light their spirit... Even Sok Chea knows a lot but still not enough.

Sok Chea plays the principal male role in Em Theay's troupe. She is in her late thirties and is tall and statuesque. Her face is elegant and composed and at times resembles the mask-like expressions of the dance.

I used to have 2 or 3 teachers but they died in the Pol Pot time. Now there's only Em Theay. Although I survived and am still alive today, I have lost some of my talent. I lost this in the Pol Pot time. Since I met up with Em Theay she has been like a mother to me and has helped me recall and has guided and trained me so that some of my spirit has returned.

Today Sok Chea juggles her role of principal dancer with that of wife and mother to three children. She tries very hard to learn the dances, often performing special ceremonies for Em Theay and the spirits of the old dance teachers who will help her remember.

On the surface Sok Chea's life is normal. But underneath she is followed by shadows of the past. Her memory is plagued by what happened to her during the Pol Pot time when six of her brothers and sisters, her father and all her sister's children died.

We cannot forget it, even when we go to sleep it's still in our minds. The Pol Pot regime lasted over 3 years but it felt like 20 or 30 years.

Many Cambodians fled their country at the end of the Pol Pot time. Sok Chea planned to leave but at the last minute couldn't go. She knew she would never belong elsewhere.

Preparing for the New Year performance - she wishes her children could know what peace was like.

Since I was born, war has started more than 4 times. My mother also knew war. It seems like the war doesn't know how to end. Whenever I talk to my children I never talk about what's going on in other countries or in other times. I only talk about Pol Pot because Pol Pot's men were killers, and very cruel, especially killing their own people.

It wasn't the Chinese killing Cambodians, nor the Vietnamese killing Cambodians and no other nationality was killing Cambodians. It was Cambodians killing Cambodians.

BACKGROUND POLITICS

From the 9th -15th centuries Cambodia, then termed the Angkor Empire, ruled much of mainland South East Asia. Parts of what are today Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam were under the rule of the Angkorean Kings. It was a glorious age and the Khmers were masters of temple building, water

irrigation and artistic endeavours. But by the mid fifteenth century the Empire was in decline. The Thai and the Vietnamese had extended their areas of influence, usurping large tracts of land. These traditional rivalries between Cambodia and her nearest neighbours still exist and continue to play an important role in the politics of the region.

In the mid 1850's the French colonialists arrived and declared Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia a French protectorate. The French remained in Indochina until 1953 when Cambodia gained independence. Under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia was propelled into the modern age. Sihanouk abdicated from the monarchy and became Head of State.

Despite popular support for Sihanouk there were sections of the population who disagreed with his emphasis on city development at the expense of the peasant class. His opponents were imprisoned, forcing many to flee to the mountains to begin the origins of what became the Khmer Rouge.

Meanwhile next door in Vietnam, the war between the North and the South escalated. As the United States purged the strongholds of the Viet Cong, Sihanouk in a gesture of nationalistic support invited the Vietnamese communists to use parts of Cambodia as routes for their arms. The United States responded in 1969 by bombing the VC sanctuaries inside Cambodia.

In 1970, under a US backed coup Sihanouk was ousted as Head of State and replaced by Lon Nol under whose rule corruption was the currency. Fortunes were made by trading arms on the black market and pocketing the salaries of fictional armies. For Cambodian people this was a period of constant unrest as the US continued its bombing until 1973, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands from their homelands. Many fled to the overcrowded city of Phnom Penh or joined up with the Khmer Rouge.

By the time the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975 people were relieved and hoped the new Government would clean up and rebuild Cambodia.

Their hopes were shattered.

Between April 17 1975 and January 1979 over one million Cambodians lost their lives under the regime of Pol Pot. Some were executed whilst the majority died of illness and starvation. The targets were city people - 'new people', the educated or cultured classes who may have had connections with the previous regime. Pol Pot envisaged a new age for Cambodian society. To achieve this the past had to be erased. 1975 was Year Zero.

Pol Pot's revolution was a dismal failure and by 1979 they were driven to the Thai border by the forces of Vietnam who immediately installed a Government and stationed over 10,000 troops in Cambodia to protect the people from a return of the Khmer Rouge.

With freedom restored thousands of malnourished Cambodians made their way to the Thai border in search of a new life, food and medical care. Many

left because they feared another communist regime especially one backed by Vietnam, the traditional enemy.

Since 1979, three factions opposed the Vietnamese backed Hun Sen government. These included the Sihanoukists; the non Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF); and the Khmer Rouge - still led by the same leaders. A civil war continued until 1991, when a United Nations sponsored Peace Plan was signed by all four factions who agreed to hold democratic elections in Cambodia under the auspice of the UN. Despite non cooperation by the Khmer Rouge a successful election was held in May 1993 with more than 90% of registered voters casting ballots.

A joint administration was set up with both the HUN SEN Cambodia People's Party and the Royalist FUNCINPEC Parties sharing power.

A Constitutional monarchy was reestablished with King Sihanouk as Head of State and his son Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen sharing Prime Ministerial positions.

Pol Pot died in 1998 and since then the Khmer Rouge have lost their power base.

In recent years Cambodia has continued to suffer with constant corruption at high Government levels a battle for power, and a coup which forced Prince Ranariddh to leave the country.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The culture of Cambodia has always been central to the life of the people. With a rich tradition in music, theatre, shadow puppetry and dance it has been the latter which has inspired the population for centuries and to this day remains a strong symbol for the beauty of the spirit of the Khmer people.

During the Angkor Kingdom the concept of 'divine royalty' existed. The GOD KING or *Deva Raja* included dance as a sacred part of the role of worship. The dancers were called *deva dasi* or 'the messengers of god' and their lives were dedicated to performing ritual dances in front of the idols. With feeling and soul the dancers used their movements, gestures and postures as a sacred language to communicate to the world of the gods. Through these dances the King maintained his allegiance to the great spirit and in return was assured prosperity and harmony for his people. The figures of these *apsaras* or dancing maidens were carved on the walls of Angkor Wat, the immense temple monument built by King Suryavarman II.

After the fall of Angkor and in the following eras the dance and its cultural role was simplified. Incorporated into the Royal Court, the dancers became a private harem for some of the Kings. Nevertheless the integrity of the dance has remained and in Cambodia today these images are national symbols and

hold great meaning as they typify the beauty and spirit of the country and the peoples' unique relationship with the gods.

Like most indigenous people the culture has an oral tradition. Nothing was written down or formally recorded. Although in recent decades the country has been devastated by war the artistic traditions continued to be passed on from generation to generation.

Much of this came to an abrupt halt when the Khmer Rouge came to power in April 1975. With a radical political philosophy designed to reform the country, purges began almost immediately which aimed to transform the population back to a peasant culture. Artists were amongst those who the regime signalled as a threat to the new way of thinking.

By 1979 over 90% of all performers and musicians had either been killed or had fled the country.

In 1981 the School Of Fine Arts was established in Phnom Penh by the Hun Sen Government. Most of the pupils at the School were orphans who could choose to study classical or folk dancing, or traditional music.

Since then over a hundred students have been trained at the School. Many now perform in the National Dance Theatre, Cambodia's Professional Dance troupe. Dancers from both groups have toured Europe, the USA, Australia and many of the former Eastern bloc countries in the last decade.

SYNOPSIS

“ Some of my friends and relatives were honest and said they were dancers. The Khmer Rouge took them away and cut them open from their necks down to their stomachs”

At the end of Pol Pot 's reign of terror only one in ten classical dancers of Cambodia's Royal Court had survived.

This is the story of the tenth dancer.

Em Theay (*pronounced Em Te-ay*) grew up in a time of peace. Surrounded by dancers she lived in the palace grounds. She never went to school but instead learnt all the songs and gestures eventually to become a teacher with the Royal Court Ballet. Her star pupil was Sok Chea (*pronounced So Cheah*), who at twenty two was poised to take the principal role at the Royal Court, when Pol Pot marched into Phnom Penh and the story of the killing fields began.

Em Theay and Sok Chea were separated. They both took on false identities and like everybody else went to work in the fields. Each day whilst their feet lay in mud their spirits still danced.

After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 they heard an announcement over a loudspeaker. All dancers, musicians and performers were begged to come to Phnom Penh to help rebuild the culture. They responded to this urgent call and within days arrived, thin and malnourished, only to discover that ninety percent of their colleagues had disappeared and that most of their cultural treasures had been destroyed.

But what the Khmer Rouge failed to destroy was the memory of the people. Em Theay, reunited with Sok Chea, gathered as many former dancers as possible and began teaching again the ancient stories and traditions of their ancestors.

The Tenth Dancer is a timely film, documenting the retrieval of a destroyed culture. Set in Cambodia today, it tells the remarkable story of a teacher and her pupil who are at the helm of rebuilding classical dance in Phnom Penh. We follow them in their daily practise and witness the preparation and participation of the Royal Ballet in the Cambodian New Year celebrations. New Year is the time when Cambodians pay respect to the gods who will offer protection - and rain - for the coming year. But it is also the time when Pol Pot marched into Phnom Penh. Through memory and experience Em Theay and Sok Chea reveal their story of survival.