

If Samuel Beckett met Pol Pot
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In some of Cambodia's thousands of killing fields, the bones of the dead can sometimes be seen, rising to the surface after storms or rain, grisly emblems of an unburied past. Perhaps 16,000 died at the S-21 Detention Camp in Phnom Penh, or at Choeung Ek outside the city. All told, an estimated 2 million people died during Pol Pot's terror reign.

Some of that horror is being retold on the stage. On Wednesday evening, the town of Tik Panhaow as the scene of a searing, stark drama in the dimly-lit marketplace in front of the village pagoda, a bumpy hour's motorcycle ride outside Phnom Penh.

Tears run down Nhem Roen's face as she watches and listens to the performers on a makeshift stage.

"Where was my father? Where did you kill him?" a woman asks. The Khmer Rouge cadre she accuses deny any foul play or knowing where the missing man is. Later, as the drama moves through its seven mini-plays, all played by the same group of actors and actresses, the impact of *Breaking the Silence* becomes apparent.

Encouraged beforehand to speak about their experiences after seeing the play, the older audience members nod in recognition of the themes, actions, dynamics and events recounted throughout, in a sparse, almost Beckettian style, which seems to fit well with the tranquil open-air setting.

Sayana Ser works for the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, whose vast repository of real-life accounts of the Khmer Rouge era were reproduced, often verbatim, in 'Breaking the Silence'. "The people identify with what they see. We have staged the play 20 times now, and often there is an emotional reaction", she says.

Watching the enactment of a scene in which a daughter steals rice from her family amid looming starvation, older men and women turn to each other. "It's true" is whispered around the 200 or so people sitting in the night-time warm, fanned by an unseasonal yet welcome cooling breeze.

Aged 58 and born in Svay Rieng, Nhem Roen was in her 20s when the Khmer Rouge killed her father and brother in Battambang. "It is good that children see this," she said, wiping her cheek, "but I am not happy that Duch is appealing".

Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Comrade Duch, was the head of S-21, a detention and

torture camp in the heart of the nearby capital. So far Duch is the only person convicted of crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge era, even though a quarter of the country's population died. He is appealing his 35 year sentence, which was handed down in July 2010 by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), to give the tribunal its full title.

Duch says he committed his crimes under duress from the senior Khmer Rouge leaders, four of whom are scheduled to go on trial later in 2011. The prosecution is saying that Duch should face a longer jail term, given that he could conceivably emerge a free man after spending 18-19 years in jail, with the sentence effectively commuted due to time already served in detention.

Lawyer and writer Theory Seng's parents were murdered by the Khmer Rouge, and she says that a reduced sentence for Duch would be an injustice. However, looking ahead to the trial of the main surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, she thinks the inconsistencies shown by Duch during his trial and appeal could jeopardize the bigger Case Number 2.

"Duch will be the star witness when Nuon Chea and the others face the court", she said, asking "what better way to discredit the witness by having him flip-flop before the court already?" She believes that Duch came under pressure to amend his remorseful stance, adding to long-standing allegations of political interference with the court.

Duch himself claims to be a scapegoat, the only one selected from hundreds if not thousands of other Khmer Rouge of similar profile or standing to face trial. "S-21 was not unique. It was like all the other security centers where torture was employed", he said on Wednesday at the closing of his appeal hearing.

According to the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, "allegations of political interference have also caused uncertainty over the likelihood of further indictments beyond Case 002, complicating the development of a completion strategy for the tribunal."

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge member, has made public his reluctance to have senior colleagues testify in Case 002. Previously, the pre-trial Chamber's international judges claimed "reason to believe that one or more members of the RGC (Royal Cambodian Government) may have knowingly and willfully interfered with witnesses." Sadly, with growing doubts over the trial of the mainly octogenarian Khmer Rouge leaders, Cambodia's tragic and traumatic drama may not be over yet.