

The Phnom Penh Post

Community-based documentary uses art to bridge generation gap

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May 7, 2009

We want (u) to Know provides a forum for Cambodian elders to share their memories of the Khmer Rouge regime with younger generations

A Village elder instructs a young boy, who is using colour pencils, on how to draw a picture of Khmer Rouge prisoners: "You should draw the chains there, just there." Though he wasn't alive at the time, the boy is helping to create a storyboard for a documentary based on people's memories from the time of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The documentary *We want (u) to Know* is to premiere tonight at Chenla Theatre, with people from Thnol Lok village in Takeo province viewing the finished product of their hard work.

The village is one of three communities that were targeted by director Ella Pugliese, whose main motivation for the film was to use collective remembrance and art to bridge the growing generation gap in villages like Thnol Lok.

"The young generation doesn't believe the stories their elders tell them about the Khmer Rouge. They think they're invented - made up to scare people," said Pugliese.

Villagers of all ages directed, wrote and filmed the documentary, creating "re-enactments" of scenes that people remember from that turbulent time.

"A lot has been done already on reconciliation, a lot of 'discussions', a lot of 'dialogue', but nothing has been done like this on a community level," Pugliese said. "Rather than an individual way of confronting the past, they share the process."

While the participatory approach of the film was always Pugliese's intention, she says the process occurred naturally.

Villagers gradually took over the staging process after they were handed film cameras and costumes.

"Different people came with a desire to realise different things. We distributed cameras and told them: 'We are not here to take photos of you.' We asked them how the film

could help them, what scenes they wanted to make. They took the cameras," said Pugliese.

An awakening

Co-director Nou Va explains how the process was akin to an awakening for many of the survivors.

Pointing to one of the main "protagonists" in the documentary - an old man showing a boy how to wear a krama like Khmer Rouge soldiers - Nou Va says the film opened up people who had been closed for a long time.

"This man, a victim - he started to tell stories that he had never told the others before. Everyone listened and was surprised. It's like, we woke them up," Nou Va said.

We want (u) to Know was produced in conjunction with the Khmer Institute of Democracy and the International Centre for Reconciliation, and funded by the German Development Service (DED).

But Pugliese insists the film is a locally owned production.

"This film is not for the European Film Festival. It's for the people in the video," she said.

With the first trial at the Khmer Rouge tribunal currently under way, the film's timing seems apt. Yet the overlap may, in fact, highlight the distance between the court and the everyday lives of Cambodians, rather than the impact it is having.

"The young people that we talked to when we made the documentary viewed the tribunal as a very distant thing, an abstract thing," Pugliese said.

She adds that although legal justice is important, it is not enough to reconcile with the past.

"With the film, they can take the past into their own hands and really make it theirs." We want (u) to Know will be screened at 4pm today at Chenla Theatre.