

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## *Breaking the Silence: Hope Regained*

*Will you forgive me, please? Maybe I said this a bit too late.  
Tomorrow I will try again. I'm sorry, please forgive me...  
Transform the Blood River into a River of Reconciliation.  
A river of responsibility. Speak, speak, speak.*  
(Excerpts from the play, *Breaking the Silence*.)

By  
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*Breaking the Silence* is a play specially created for Cambodian villagers who survived the turmoil of the Khmer Rouge regime. The play hopes to foster dialogue between survivors which focus on issues of accountability ways of reconciling one's past with the present.

With beautiful narrations, the performances in the play depict daily life under the Khmer Rouge regime and the present day emotional and psychological struggles of both victims and perpetrators.



*Asking for forgiveness scene. (Photo: Sayana Ser).*

The play is about regaining hope. It also seeks to give courage to audience members to speak out about what they experienced and in the process for some, the courage to confess, apologize, and seek forgiveness.

Written and directed by Mrs. Annemarie Prins with research assistance from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), each of the seven stories in the play is based mostly on interviews conducted with survivors in the provinces. The play is approximately one hour and fifteen minutes long.

### ***The Characters***

The characters are represented by four female teachers from the Royal University of Fine Arts who play both male and female roles. One character is a woman who suffers from guilt because she stole rice that was for emergencies when she was a little girl. Another character no longer speaks to her son because she suspects that he carried out atrocities as a Khmer Rouge cadre. The other characters are young Khmer Rouge soldiers who had a comparatively good life serving *Angkar* (the Party regime). All seven stories involve similar conflicting emotions and words which the four individuals are scared to express.



*Beginning of a Theme (Photo: Sayana Ser).*



*The play in Kampong Cham (Photo: Sayana Ser).*

### ***A Successful Mix of Music and Dance.***

The usage of Cambodian music and dance throughout the play increases its accessibility to village audiences in addition to providing a calming atmosphere. Some audience members were brought to tears. The play is not entirely sorrowful however, as some scenes included traditional upbeat dances such as the monkey dance.

### ***Opening in Phnom Penh***

A preliminary performance was given at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts for ministers and officials for prior approval. On 21 and 22 of February, the play opened at the Exhibition Hall located across from the House of Parliament. Based on initial responses after its premiere in Phnom Penh, *Breaking the Silence* had a major impact on its audience. A number of people said that the play should be seen by as many people as possible. DC-Cam Director Youk Chhang remarked, “Cambodians have lost their souls for 30 years and I found my soul in this play.” He believes that art such as Mrs. Prins’ play can help Cambodians treasure the beauty in the darkness of traumatic experiences.

Prins’ *Breaking the Silence* has plans for a nationwide tour with support from the Royal Embassy of the Netherlands and several organizations, including the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) which provided research and will bring the production to various provinces as part of its outreach activities. A mobile theatre was constructed to transport the play outside the capital to the countryside.

### ***First Touring in Kampong Cham Province***

On 25 and 26 of February, the play was performed in Rorkarpo Pram sub-district, Thbong Khmum district in Kampong Cham province. The stage was setup in the courtyard of the sub-district office compound. As this was the first tour, it took two days to prepare the necessary logistics including stage design and setup, and



*A story about Divided People (Photo: Sayana Ser).*

enlisting the collaboration of local authorities.

The performance began at 7pm on the first night. There were well over 500 people in the audience on the first night with about 100 children seated on woven mats, 250 adults seated in chairs, and another 200 adults standing to watch the play. DC-Cam also invited a group of 35 students from Norway to learn more about the Khmer Rouge period and its aftermath. Sur-titles were shown for them.

The audience applauded vigorously at the end of the play. An old man stood up and talked about the cruelty of Khmer Rouge cadres towards him when he was imprisoned in Kampong Cham. He said that he loved the play but that the cruel acts performed in the play do not come close to his real life experiences during the genocide. During the 45 minute Q&A, many of younger audience members asked questions such as, “Why did Khmers killed Khmers?” and other related question about the Khmer Rouge regime. Mr. Youk Chhang was there to help answer some of the questions on the first night.

On the second day, the show started at 7.30 p.m. There was a smaller crowd, approximately 400 people. The show was also well received. A group of 20 students from Thbong Khmum High School attended the show. This group was organized by Peace Corps volunteers in Thbong Khmum and DC-Cam’s Student Outreach team leader, who helped answer questions at the end. The night concluded with tributes paid to audience members, everyone involved in the production, and local authorities.

The second and the third tour destinations were in Kandal and Takeo provinces. The play was schedule for two dates (February 28 and March 1) in Kandal province. However, the first date was cancelled due to rain and strong winds. The play was performed the next night successfully, albeit with some intrusion from numerous insects that flew around the lights creating difficulties for the actors. In all, approximately 500 children and adults saw the play in Kandal province. In Takeo province the play was performed on the weekend of March 7 and 8. The stage was set up in the soccer field in Wat Rumlork (Rumlork Pagoda) in Basré sub-district, Angkor Borei district. This fourth tour location likewise drew a large audience, despite light rain in the evening.

End.