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Disturbing the Silence: A Study of Performance and Collective Memory in Cambodia

Master's Dissertation in Theatre and Drama Research/Theaterwetenschap
MA in International Performance Research (MAIPR)

January 2010
Tampere/Amsterdam

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many individuals for their generous help and support, without which this thesis would not have been seen to completion:

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Hanna Suutela and Dr. Sruti Bala, for seeing me through this process. Their time and patience, especially with the uncertainty of the earlier stages, are very much appreciated.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Berith Danse and the staff of Theatre Embassy, Amsterdam, for first introducing me to *Breaking the Silence*, and for their support of and continued interest in my work concerning the production.

My sincerest thanks to Fred Frumberg, Suon Bunrith and Sin Sokunthea from Amrita Performing Arts, Phnom Penh, whose research and logistical assistance was instrumental in rendering my trip to Phnom Penh possible and fruitful. I am deeply touched by their kindness and generosity despite being preoccupied with the company's ongoing projects.

I am very grateful to Annemarie Prins and Nan van Houte for taking time off their busy schedules to grant me an interview, and for their kind support of my work. Similarly, I would like to thank Chey Chankethya, Chhang Youk, Chhon Sina, Kov Sotheary, Morm Sokly, Pok Sovanna, Ser Sayana, and Pich Kalyan and the residents of Khum Tean village for their time, and their warmth and openness in sharing their experiences with me.

Many thanks to Catherine Filloux and Toni Shapiro-Phim, with whom I had the fortune to meet briefly in Phnom Penh, and whose work and ideas undoubtedly influence this thesis.

My appreciation also goes to Ka Thearith, my translator in Phnom Penh, not only for her help during the interviews, but also for the companionship and friendship that she so warmly extended.

My utmost gratitude to Joanne Ng for her invaluable help with proofreading, critical suggestions for improvement, and unwavering support. Thanks also to Xu Sangyu and Ua-Atorn Wongsiri for additional proofreading help.

My thanks and solidarity to the pioneering MAIPR cohort of 2008/09 – for the intellectual discussions, mutual encouragement, and commiseration over deadlines, but especially for the laughter, tears, and unforgettable experiences of the past year and a half.

Last but not least, thanks to my family, for their ever-present love.

Abstract

This thesis explores the use of performance to deal with collective memory in the Cambodian context, specifically with respect to memories of the Khmer Rouge regime. Using two minor case studies and a main case study performance, *Breaking the Silence,* this thesis explores questions concerning the significance of performance in influencing the collective memory of Cambodia, and the cultural political and ethical issues raised by performance projects involving the collaboration of non-Cambodians. With respect to *Breaking the Silence*, it points out the problematic assumption that the predominant attitude towards the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia is one of silence, and the underlying Euro-centric orientation of the project. More generally, it aims to show that the collective memory of Cambodia consists not of a homogenous narrative, but of numerous competing strands; while some may find performance a therapeutic means of dealing with the troubling memories, for others performance is not sufficient. Finally, the involvement of non-Cambodian elements in performances shaping the collective memory of Cambodia is also questioned.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of the interest in examining performance in relation to collective memory, as well as briefly introduces the main case study, *Breaking the Silence,* and discusses the approach of basing a significant part of the research on interviews with individuals involved in the performance. Chapter 2 contextualises the thesis, giving background information on performance in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge period, and collective memory theory. It also includes a discussion

of two smaller case studies, leading up to the main discussion of *Breaking the Silence* in Chapter 3. Finally, the concluding chapter links the discussion in Chapter 3 back to the earlier chapters, and sums up the main points of the thesis.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Collective memory, as a subject of academic research, has been studied and written about under a disparate range of fields, such as "history, sociology, semiotics, psychology, and anthropology" (Wertsch 10). Noticeably absent from Werstch's list is theatre or performance studies. Even if not discussed in exact relation to the term "collective memory," several scholars have focused their work on theatre and performance and their central role in constructing collective identities, notably amongst them Freddie Rokem and Diana Taylor. As Rokem writes, expressing the importance of theatre for the negotiation of the past, "collective identities, whether they are cultural/ethnic, national, or even transnational, grow from a sense of the past; the theatre very forcefully participates in the ongoing representations and debates about these pasts, sometimes contesting the hegemonic understanding of the historical heritage on the basis of which these identities have been constructed, sometimes reinforcing them" (3).

Performance has been used in many contexts to help a group or groups of people to deal with significant chapters of their past, usually, but not necessarily, of a painful or difficult nature. An obvious example would be the numerous plays treating as their subject matter the Holocaust or its aftermath.[1] Other periods of social, political and cultural upheaval have also spawned creative or artistic works – a study by Ripoll i Freixes found that 66 films about the Spanish Civil War were produced or co-produced by Spanish teams between 1940 and 1991 (cited in Igartua and Paez 84).

[1] The University of South Florida's Center for Instructional Technology lists fourteen plays on its website. See also Fuchs; and Skloot, for anthologies of plays about the Holocaust.

Besides addressing specific historical events, performance can also play a crucial part in collective memory of a more general nature, as Gay McAuley explores in a study on the effects of place and performance on the Australian national consciousness (149-159).

As Duncan Bell explains, "collective memory . . . refers, again in a general sense, to widely shared perceptions of the past" (2). It should be emphasised, as implicit in Bell's statement above, that collective memory represents a version of events, constructed through certain means, rather than being an accurate or objective recollection of the past. Furthermore, Bell elaborates that collective memory "is what keeps the past – or at least a highly selective image of it – alive in the present." Interestingly, Rokem writes about theatrical performance in very similar terms – in his conception, performance is what links the past with the present and makes the past relevant in order to address difficult issues embedded in past events (xii-xiii). The connection between collective memory and performance can be seen in the convergence between the above two articulations of each as means of making the past present. I regard collective memory as the wider concept, encompassing performance along with myriad other transmission mediums, thus I examine performance in this thesis as one of the means through which collective memory can be constructed. In the negotiation of collective memory by, and in some cases for, a community, performance serves the dual purposes of expressing a "highly selective" version of events, and transmitting it amongst the members of the community.

The intertwining of performance and collective memory is especially apparent in the case of Cambodia, staggeringly ironic in light of

the fate of the country's performing artists under the Khmer Rouge regime. From 17 April 1975 to 7 January 1979, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, took over Cambodia and instituted the ruthless regime that led to the deaths of almost two million people. Artists, especially performers and teachers of the long standing tradition of Khmer classical dance, were among those singled out for persecution, as part of a wider targetting of "classical Cambodian performance and culture" (Hamera 147), but also because of their close ties with the royal court (Phim and Thompson 42). The oft-quoted statistic that nine of out ten dancers did not survive the regime (Hamera 147; Orenstein 393) bears testimony to the tragic consequences of the regime for Cambodian performing arts. Yet, performance is arguably one of the most important means through which people are attempting to make sense of the immensely difficult memories associated with the period, the horrors of which often defy explanation in words.

This thesis thus examines issues surrounding the use of performance to deal with collective memory, specifically that of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, using Amrita Performing Arts' *Breaking the Silence* as the primary case study, but also considering other aspects of the contemporary Cambodian performance scene such as Khmer classical dance and Western theatrical forms. The case of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia stands out as particularly intriguing for a study about collective memory, because unlike the "textually mediated nature of much of collective memory" (Wertsch 5), relatively little has been written by Cambodian survivors themselves about life during the period (Osborne 159). Addressing the perceived atmosphere of silence on the subject

amongst Cambodians, *Breaking the Silence*, as its title suggests, specifically encourages Cambodians of all backgrounds to start giving word to their experiences, thoughts and feelings about the period, as a means to deal with the pain and with the aim of eventually working towards reconciliation amongst the different groups involved.

The collaborative structure of *Breaking the Silence*, as will be described below, and the idea of "giving word", would immediately raise questions about the possible Euro-centrism of the project, given the overwhelming emphasis on the written word in European culture. The text-based, printed nature of most of the literature arising from European cultures is in contrast with the oral nature of much of Asian literature, known to its audience in the form of poems and narratives transmitted by word of mouth. Milton Singer writes of his surprise at the realisation that many of the Indians he has encountered are familiar with the epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* through "spoken language" mediums, as opposed to having read them in printed form (66-67). As will be discussed later, this bias towards the written word may have had some influence on the idea that the "silence" on the subject of the Khmer Rouge has to be "broken" at all. This thesis thus questions the cultural politics involved in having Dutch theatre-makers come into the Cambodian context to work on the production, challenging the Euro-centric assumption that the Cambodian attitude towards the Khmer Rouge period is one of silence. It also addresses the ethical issues that arise from the use of traumatic personal memories as material for performance. Above all, it explores the

role that performance takes on for Cambodians in the meaning-making process that is so crucial to collective memory.

Apart from its interest as a study dealing with that specific period in Cambodian history, a period that does not seem to have been widely considered in relation to performance thus far, this thesis also addresses issues beyond those usually focused on in studies surrounding theatre or performance and history, memory and identity. As acknowledged above, writers such as Rokem and Taylor have examined thoughtfully the link between performance and collective memory. However, the plays that Rokem analyses come from within the community that experienced the historical event, for example Israeli plays about the Holocaust, and European plays about the French Revolution, while the case studies that I discuss are all performances ultimately created by non-Cambodians, even if with strong Cambodian collaboration. Hence Rokem's study deals with the remembering of the community itself – his case studies represent the particular community's efforts to address their own past. Taylor takes national, racial and gender identity as her subjects of focus, also concerning to a large extent the negotiation of identity in the Latin American context by insiders to the community. This thesis, in contrast, addresses a situation in which the remembering seems to be done for Cambodians by foreign performance practitioners, if not at least substantially influenced by foreign points of view. In this light, my study encompasses an aspect of collective memory apart from that already comprehensively analysed by scholars in the field.

In addition to *Breaking the Silence*, I also consider two other case studies in less detail, which nevertheless reveal useful insights about performance and Cambodian collective memory. One of them, a thought-provoking and poignant study by Judith Hamera, closely examines the meaning of traditional Cambodian dance in the lives of a family of survivors now living in the United States, having successfully relocated there through a refugee camp on the Thai border. One of Hamera's main arguments is that sustaining and preserving Cambodian performance has become the goal of many performing artists, as an attempt to justify their otherwise unexplainable survival, regardless of any conscious awareness of such a reasoning on their part (150, 169). *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* by Singaporean theatre company TheatreWorks, a production that documents the story of a former court dancer who survived, carries echoes of Hamera's observations. The reflections of the dancer, Em Theay, in a BBC news article about the production ("Cambodia's 'Tenth Dancer'"), reveal the questioning and inability to find an explanation for her own survival similar to that articulated by Hamera. According to the same BBC article, Em Theay "has since committed her life to rebuilding Cambodia's cultural heritage," using performance as the means with which to make sense of her life following the Khmer Rouge regime. This brief introduction highlights the importance of performance for dealing with collective memory; indeed, the centrality of the role that performance plays for some people in dealing with especially painful memories. These two cases, the study by Hamera and the TheatreWorks production, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.3.

The main case study for this thesis, as mentioned before, is the production of a play, *Breaking the Silence*. Produced by Amrita Performing Arts, an international production company based in Cambodia with United States Non-profit status, the play is a collaborative effort between several individuals and organisations. The director and scriptwriter, Annemarie Prins, is an established theatre practitioner from the Netherlands, with experience in a wide range of performance platforms including political theatre, avant-garde performance, and the more mainstream areas of film and television. Dramaturge Nan van Houte, also from the Netherlands, is the current programme director of the Netherlands Theatre Institute (TIN). Research assistance was provided by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), the organisation that researches and collects information about the Khmer Rouge period, and is currently actively involved in the provision of evidence for tribunals surrounding the atrocities of the regime. The cast of *Breaking the Silence* comprises four main actresses, all teachers and dancers who graduated from Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts after it was reopened in the 1980's, as well as a singer, a male dancer, and a musician, all Cambodian artists. The production team is mainly Cambodian, which the exception of a Dutch and a Singaporean team member.

Breaking the Silence premiered on 21 February 2009 in Phnom Penh, following which a tour through several villages in the provinces began on 25 February and lasted till early March ("Premiere"; Prins and Martens). Plans for the production of a radio play version to be rehearsed and recorded are underway at the time of writing of this thesis, as well as a

second touring run of the stage play to other villages not included in the first run. The production processes of the radio play and second run, originally scheduled for October and November 2009, were postponed to January 2010. As such, due to the conflicts in schedule, I have not been able to consider the process of the second run and radio play in this thesis, focusing on the first run and its production process instead.

To better understand the collaborative structure of the production, it will now be opportune to describe the work and philosophy of one of the collaborators of the project previously unmentioned, the Dutch theatre organisation Theatre Embassy, which functions as co-producer in the overall scheme. Theatre Embassy was the main avenue through which my interest in *Breaking in Silence* was first aroused, eventually leading to the formation of this thesis. As an intern at Theatre Embassy from February to June 2009, where I worked on a reformulation of the organisation's mission, vision and working model, I came across *Breaking the Silence* during my research concerning the organisation's past and ongoing projects. Besides this project, several options were available to me as interesting and thought-provoking material inspiring further research. Among them were two of Theatre Embassy's ongoing projects at the time, *Dieuna Diaffe*, a Senagalese production, and *Basal'ya Bazoba*, a project located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The work of Theatre Embassy intrigued me, as the motivation and aims behind it are certainly laudable, but at the same time also unable to escape the charge of imperialism, something which the members of the organisation themselves were acutely aware of. The culturally and, to a large extent, ethically sensitive natures of

all the above projects resonated with my continuing interest in postcolonialism and cultural politics – the decision to focus on *Breaking the Silence* and the Cambodian context was ultimately influenced by my better knowledge of and experience with Cambodian culture, as compared to my relative unfamiliarity with the cultural and historical contexts of the alternative projects.

Theatre Embassy works with partner organisations in developing countries, according to a fairly specific model, on projects that are largely participatory in nature, and can be described as Community Theatre or Theatre for Development (TfD) depending on each project and its specific context.[2] The Theatre Embassy working model usually involves a professional practitioner, in the case of *Breaking the Silence*, Annemarie Prins, bringing his or her expertise into the local context of the production. This practitioner should function as a representative of, or ambassador for, Theatre Embassy, helping to carry out its goals over the course of the project. The local partner organisation hosts the project and is usually the production company that stages the final performance, in projects where a performance is one of the planned outcomes. The performers who are to take part in the final performance in many cases also come from the local partner organisation, and play an important role in the process of putting together the performance. In addition, several other individuals and organisations may be involved depending on the project: practitioners contributing artistically to the project, local and international Non-

[2] I acknowledge the ambiguity that surrounds these terms – Kees Epskamp suggests "the use of the term 'participatory theatre' as a common denominator for all sorts of participatory forms of performing arts and applied drama, including TfD, Theatre in Education, Community Theatre and Forum Theatre" (11). Epskamp also provides an in-depth treatment of the history of TfD and models of its application.

Governmental Organisations (NGOs), funding organisations and government agencies (Danse and Chng).

Numerous recent official statements and documents from various international and regional bodies have articulated the responsibility to develop and protect international cultural heritage.[3] The Commission of European Communities, in particular, asserts that "cultural activities also help promoting [sic] an inclusive society and contribute to preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion" (3). In a similar vein, the United Nations Creative Economy Report states that "despite the richness of their cultural diversity and the abundance of creative talent, the great majority of developing countries are not yet fully benefiting from the enormous potential of their creative economies to improve development gains" (6). It is clear from statements such as those above that a trend has appeared towards increasingly recognising culture as an aspect of development that is as important as other, more traditionally accepted aspects, such as economic or political development.

As Epskamp notes, in the last decade or so, culture has taken on a prominent role in development planning and policy, influenced by high-profile international conferences on culture and development (34). In line with the above, the Commission of European Communities maintains that "a wide variety of cultural projects and programmes have been implemented for many years as part of the [European] Union's financial and technical assistance across all developing regions of the world" (7). Theatre Embassy's goals thus fit into the wider structure of international, or

[3] See for example Commission of European Communities; Klaic; United Nations; UNESCO, *Convention*; UNESCO, *Ten Keys*; and UNESCO, *Universal*.

at least, European Union, development policies, as can be seen in its work to develop and promote the performing arts themselves in specific cultural contexts, as well as to make use of the performing arts to raise awareness about other issues more commonly associated with development, such as violence, health, and natural resource conservation.[4]

In this context, it is reasonable to conceive of *Breaking the Silence* as a TfD project. The play is a specific instance of the conscious use of performance to bring about change, to encourage more open communication about the past as a means for Cambodians to come to terms with that very difficult period in their recent history. At the same time, the project, as part of Cambodia's contemporary theatre scene, involving Dutch theatre practitioners as collaborators, can be seen as cultural development in itself. The place of *Breaking the Silence* within the wider framework of the contemporary Cambodian performing arts scene, as well as the implications of the involvement of foreign collaborators, are issues central to the exploration of this thesis, as will be elaborated upon in the rest of the thesis.

[4] For instance, one of Theatre Embassy's projects in 2006, *Huellas*, dealt with the issue of gang violence in Central America. Another project, *Titik Koma*, was undertaken in Indonesia in 2008, dealing with HIV/AIDS awareness.

1.2 Methodology, Fieldwork and Limitations

Apart from standard library research, the research for this thesis incorporates, to a substantial extent, interviews with the cast, creative team, and a number of audience members of *Breaking the Silence*. These interviews were conducted over the period of September and October 2009, in Amsterdam and Phnom Penh. As this thesis is concerned with the part that *Breaking the Silence* can be said to play in the collective memory of Cambodia, the experiences and possible changes in attitude towards remembering the period, of the Cambodians involved in the production, were of direct interest to the research. With the small pool of interview subjects that this research is based on, I of course recognise the danger of making generalisations in my claims. However, as it is also impracticable to assess the collective memory of Cambodians as a whole, those directly involved in the production would be the logical sources of information and insight. The point to stress, perhaps, is that *Breaking the Silence* is only an example of a performance used to address the issue of collective memory – even if not expressed in those terms by those involved in it. What this particular example, and the experiences and observations of those involved, might reveal, should correspondingly be understood as the result of the particular circumstances of this production and its larger context. Just as I draw on those observations and experiences of other theorists and practitioners that I find relevant to my case, it is hoped that the observations arising from my research surrounding *Breaking the Silence* might serve some purpose in illuminating other similar situations, but only with the awareness of its particularities.

The interviews conducted as research for this thesis were also important means of shedding light on the cultural political and ethical questions posed by this thesis. However, the complexity of these issues renders the possibility of reaching any fixed conclusions about them doubtful. Indeed, my not having been present during the production process itself in order to directly observe the dynamics of the collaboration is admittedly one of the main limitations of this research. The interviews were therefore a valuable means of getting a glimpse into the working dynamics of the project, even if basing the research on inevitably subjective interviews is recognised as a just criticism. To this possible criticism, however, I have two responses: firstly, in some cases, the rather apparent subjectivity of particular interviewees reflected the very cultural politics at work within the collaboration, and thus provided useful insights for the purposes of the thesis; and secondly, in any research of this kind subjectivity is to an extent unavoidable – as a researcher I recognise that my comments are themselves subject to scrutiny for being influenced by any number of factors.

Several more limitations of this thesis should be addressed at this juncture. Related to the interviews, the perceived formality by some of the interviewees of the interview set-up may have influenced their responses, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.3. I do not discount the possibility of some of the responses being more a reflection of what the interviewees might have thought I wanted to hear, rather than what they genuinely felt. For example, I do not necessarily doubt the assertions of the actresses that *Breaking the Silence* had helped them in coming to terms with their

difficult memories, but I would caution against too simplistic an interpretation. The process of coming to terms with such painful experiences, if at all possible, would obviously be long-drawn and complicated, not achieved through involvement in just one production, no matter how therapeutic the performance and production process may prove. However, the actresses may have felt unable to further elaborate on their healing processes due to both the distance set up between us by the interview framing and translation difficulties, which leads to my next reservation.

Not knowing the Khmer language has been an admitted disadvantage in my research process. Conducting my interviews with the Cambodian interviewees through a translator inevitably raises reservations, as the possibility of misinterpretations on both sides was certainly very real. Unfortunately, within the constraints of this thesis, I have not been able to study Khmer, which would not only have enabled me to communicate directly with my interviewees but also offered me a deeper insight into Khmer culture. Therefore, while I have taken care, as far as realistically possible, to clarify any uncertainties during the interviews, I acknowledge that my understanding and interpretation are nevertheless affected by the limits of translation.

Also, my discussion considers only certain performance forms – namely *Lakhaon Niyeay*, or Western-style spoken theatre, and to a smaller extent, Khmer classical dance. I acknowledge that this narrow and somewhat disparate focus limits the discussion and the conclusions that can be made from it. Considerations of a greater number of case studies and

other classical Cambodian performance forms that might also deal with collective memory would expand the discussion, and perhaps offer more useful comparisons with Khmer classical dance.

Lastly, in my analysis of the implications of foreign or Western involvement in *Breaking the Silence*, and more broadly, Cambodian collective memory, I am aware that my own point of view does not escape the very criticisms that I make. This is because, as a non-Cambodian, with an English-language medium and predominantly Western-influenced educational background, my own ideas and perceptions, especially regarding performance and theatrical analysis, are inevitably influenced by Western schools of thought. This is a conundrum in which I admittedly cannot escape being trapped.

Turning now to the rest of the thesis, Chapter 2 provides the background for making sense of the research, laying out the historical and cultural context against which to understand *Breaking the Silence*. It incorporates theoretical research on collective memory, establishing the framework that the rest of the thesis will be based on. In addition, two minor case studies concerning Cambodian performance and its relation to collective memory will be considered at the end of the chapter, as a preliminary to the discussion on *Breaking the Silence*, which follows in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of the performance, moving on to a consideration of the main issues of the thesis set out above, based on the performance analysis and the interviews conducted. Finally, Chapter 4 seeks to link the findings from Chapter 3 with earlier discussions, as well as

provide a more general discussion of collective memory and performance in the Cambodian context.

Chapter 2: Collective Memory, Performance and the Cambodian Context

2.1 Setting the Scene

As a country associated with the rich performance traditions of the Khmer culture,[5] Cambodia has seen a tragic disruption to its performing arts as a result of the conflict that ravaged the country in the late twentieth century. This chapter provides the background for the discussions to follow in later chapters, situating them in the context of the two main subjects that this thesis deals with in relation to the overarching framework of collective memory: performance in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge regime. The performance landscape of Cambodia – historically as well as more contemporarily – will be briefly introduced in this chapter, as well as the Khmer Rouge period lasting from 1975 to 1979 that left an indelible mark on the collective memory of Cambodia, which has only slowly begun to be addressed.

Before proceeding, some clarification should be made of the term "performance" as used in this thesis. "Performance" has come to be overwhelmingly associated with the growing discipline of performance studies, as detailed in the work of theorists in the field such as Richard Schechner and Judith Butler. In the context of this thesis' concern with Cambodia, however, it is not as relevant to deal with performance encompassing the wider sense of performativity, as what is being examined is performance in a more limited, conventional sense. In this thesis

[5] People of Khmer ethnicity make up the overwhelming majority of the population in Cambodia, with other ethnic groups such as the Cham Muslims and the Chinese forming a small minority. However, where culture and performance are discussed in this thesis, it is generally that of Khmer culture that is referred to, as I am unfortunately unable to include discussions of the minority cultures within the scope of this thesis.

"performance" is generally taken to refer to the performance forms commonly seen in Cambodia – Khmer classical forms as well as Western-style spoken theatre or *Lakhaon Niyeay*, the latter corresponding more or less to Western bourgeois theatre which was introduced to Cambodia during the French colonial period. The historical development of these performance forms will be briefly elaborated upon in the following section.

It will be appropriate now to comment upon the relevance of discussing performance in relation to that specific part of Cambodia's history – the Khmer Rouge regime. Two main, not unrelated, points come to mind. Firstly, the Khmer Rouge's antagonistic stance towards all forms of leisure meant that the development of Cambodia's performing arts came to a standstill during the regime; furthermore, most of Cambodia's creative and performing artists suffered tragic consequences as a result of their connections with the Royal Palace, or being deemed part of the despised intellectual elite. Secondly, performance is generally seen to be a very powerful means of dealing with painful memories – this will be discussed and exemplified in Chapter 2.3. Hence, in an ironic reversal, performance in Cambodia has come from intense persecution by the Khmer Rouge, to being increasingly used in dealing with the painful memories of the period. Another point of interest relating to the above discussion is that despite the significance of considering performance in relation to the Khmer Rouge regime as articulated above, there seem to have hardly been any studies making the connection between the two. Histories detailing the regime tend to be written from historical or sociological points of view, and conversely,

texts about Cambodian performance tend to gloss over the Khmer Rouge period and its effect on performance very summarily.[6]

The situation is complicated, however, by the observation that theoretical studies on collective memory are essentially a product of the Western academic tradition, and that the cultural interest in memory can be said to stem from Western thought (Whitehead 1-2). It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the interest shown in using performance to address the memory of the Khmer Rouge regime has come overwhelmingly from foreign artists working in Cambodia or among Cambodian diasporic communities, as the case studies discussed later in this thesis will show. As can be seen, then, the issue is a very complicated one. Performance in Cambodia, on the one hand, having been all but wiped out during the Khmer Rouge period, is gradually being revived in recent years. Perhaps intuitively, the interest shown by foreign artists in the twofold process of developing Cambodian performance and helping Cambodians to come to terms with their incomprehensible history (Prins and van Houte) should be considered a positive phenomenon. On the other hand, the overwhelming involvement of foreign practitioners in such projects is not unproblematic either.

2.1.1 Performance in Cambodia – Classical Khmer Forms and *Lakhaon Niyeay* up to the Early 1970's

While this section aims to give some background to the performance landscape of Cambodia so as to put the main discussions into

[6] See Phim and Thompson 11, 42 for their description of the regime's effect on classical Khmer performance.

perspective, it will not be relevant or useful to write here at length about the history of performance in Cambodia.[7] What follows will thus be a very brief overview of the subject. First and foremost, it will be useful to bear in mind that Cambodian performance forms, as with those originating from many other parts of Asia, tend not to fit precisely into classifications of Western performance genres, leading at times to confusion in terminology. Therefore, the Khmer term *Lakhaon Niyeay* will henceforth be used to refer to the specific form of text-based, generally realistic, fourth-wall theatre as understood by Cambodians. The term "spoken theatre", which can be understood to encompass a much wider range of performance forms, will be avoided unless it is indeed that wide range of forms being referred to. This complication will be further addressed later in the chapter. Where written about in the English language, performance forms in Cambodia have generally been divided into three categories by researchers, enabling them to correspond more easily to Western conceptions of performing art forms: namely, "traditional village performance", "classical court forms", and "modern popular genres" (Brandon, *Cambridge* 19). The latter two categories, being the ones most relevant to this thesis, will be given focus in this summary.

Khmer classical performance traditions stretch back for centuries. Describing the ancestors of the people who live in present-day Cambodia, Brandon comments, "the magnificent temple ruins of Angkor Wat and the Royal Cambodian Ballet are legacies of this once great civilization which reached its zenith in the twelfth century" (*Southeast* 8). As the comment

[7] For more detailed historical studies of Cambodian performance forms, see Brandon, *Cambridge*; Brandon, *Southeast*; Daravuth and Muan; and Phim and Thompson.

suggests, the Royal Cambodian Ballet,[8] or Khmer classical dance, is probably one of the cultural elements most readily associated with Cambodia by foreigners. The long history of the dance form is indisputable – as Brandon notes in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, "references to female dancers in Cambodia begin as early as AD 611 when there are reports of female dancers being dedicated to Hindu temples" (20). Moreover, contemporary Khmer classical dance is often thought of as being directly descended from the dance form depicted by the *apsaras* (see Figure 1) found on the bas-reliefs of the Angkor-era temple ruins (Brandon, *Southeast* 59; Phim and Thompson 33). However, the dance form as it is seen today is a relatively modern manifestation – "current Cambodian variants on the ancient arts are only about 150 years old, and were influenced by Thai models in the 19th Century" (Brandon, *Cambridge* 20).

Figure 1

Whitear, Jon, and Alison Beaton. *Apsara, Angkor Wat*. 2005. *The Wondering Eye: Travel Photography*. Web. 10 Nov. 2009.

[8] The "Royal Cambodian Ballet" has been variously used to refer both to the dance form and the company of dancers linked to the royal court, which results in some confusion. Contrary to Brandon's usage in the above instance, I choose to use the term in the rest of this thesis to indicate only the dance company, referring to the dance form always as Khmer classical or court dance.

Hence, while Khmer classical dance has an undoubtedly long history, it is also a misconception and nostalgic fantasy that that history has been immutable. As expressed by Brandon, "a world of difference separates the elaborately costumed, chaste, and refined Cambodian dancers of today from the bare-breasted, hip-swinging beauties of Angkor" (*Southeast* 59). The dance form as it is practised today bears much more resemblance to its Thai counterpart, as a result of conflicts over the ages between the respective courts – the entire Khmer court, including its dancers, was taken in captivity to Thailand in the fifteenth century, where Thai classical dancers developed their art form from what they learnt from the Khmer court dancers. The dance form, as it eventually developed in Thailand, then found its way back to Cambodia in the nineteenth century when the dance of the Cambodian court was adapted according to the Thai form, especially in terms of costumes. It is this remodelled version that is known to us today as Khmer classical dance.

The main classical dance group up till before the Khmer Rouge revolution, the Royal Cambodian Ballet, was fully maintained by the royal court. "Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, royal dancers lived a secluded life inside the palace walls, practising daily, and serving and performing for the king" (Phim and Thompson 38). From the 1940's onwards court dancers were accorded more personal freedom and permitted to have their own lives outside the palace. Training, however, remained within the palace compound (Phim and Thompson 40). The undeniable continued association of Khmer classical dance with the royal

court made dancers prime targets for persecution when the Khmer Rouge came into power, as will be elaborated on below.

Lakhaon Niyeay, on the other hand, "has often been described as an imported Western form, which became established in Cambodia during the late Protectorate" (Daravuth and Muan 66). As has been mentioned, *Lakhaon Niyeay* corresponds roughly to bourgeois, fourth-wall theatre, performed in the Khmer language. Employing realistic sets and costumes, everyday speech, and scenarios revolving around the lives of common people, this form of performance was hugely different from classical performance forms and considered novel and unusual when first established in the early twentieth century. Its beginnings lay with the establishment of a school, the "Ecole du théâtre nouveau" 'School of new theatre', together with an associated performing company, by Guy Porée, the appointed "cultural attache to the Cambodian king" (Daravuth and Muan 66-67).

From the circumstances surrounding the establishment of *Lakhaon Niyeay* and its development up till the early 1970's, it is apparent that the form holds strong links with colonialism and politics. The initial school of *Lakhaon Niyeay* founded by Porée became the "Ecole Nationale du Théâtre" 'National School of Theatre' in 1957-58, while its associated company became known as the "National Theater". In a highly revealing interview, Chheng Pon, one of Cambodia's foremost theatre practitioners and Minister of Culture in the 1980's, explicitly equates the National Theater, or *Lakhaon Cheat*, with *Lakhaon Niyeay*, the reason being that the government was at the time giving financial support to *Lakhaon Niyeay* (106). That a form of theatre previously unknown to Cambodia was, after

only twenty to thirty years since its introduction, being promoted as its "national" theatre, is undeniably a manifestation of the colonial politics of the time.

The practice of *Lakhaon Niyeay* as Cambodia's "national" theatre is also ironic considering the form's elitist associations – as an interview with Pring Sakhon, an actor and teacher, reveals, at *Lakhaon Cheat* performances "the audience wore beautiful clothes and you had to be beautiful in order to buy a ticket. You couldn't go in there with your selling baskets under your arm" (138). Hence, what was known as the national theatre before the Khmer Rouge period was essentially a colonialist enterprise, based on Western spoken theatre and catering more or less only to the very privileged classes of Cambodian society. It is also worthwhile to point out the particularity of the composition of Cambodian society at the time: the population was only twenty percent urban, and the majority of the urban Phnom Penh population consisted of "Chinese shopkeepers and Vietnamese workers" (Kiernan 10). The implication would be, then, that the so-called national theatre, located in Phnom Penh, was patronised by an insignificant proportion of the Cambodian population. Although original plays by Cambodian playwrights were staged as well as adaptations of plays by Molière, Shakespeare and Chekhov (Hang, "D'introduction"; Hang, "Molière"), and efforts were made by *Lakhaon Niyeay* students to tour the countryside and appeal to rural audiences (Daravuth and Muan 70-71), it still remains that the impact of *Lakhaon Niyeay* probably lay within a relatively small circle of academics and theatre practitioners and students.

2.1.2 The Khmer Rouge Regime – its Effect on Performance and Performing Artists

The Khmer Rouge invasion of the capital, Phnom Penh, took place on 17 April 1975. The regime was to have control over Cambodia for the next three years, eight months and twenty days, until January 1979. As with the previous section on performance in Cambodia, this would not be an appropriate place for a lengthy treatment of the political history of Cambodia. Detailed analyses of the extremely complicated political situation leading up to the Khmer Rouge victory in Phnom Penh over the previous Lon Nol government have been undertaken by several writers.[9]

What is notable, for the purposes of this thesis, is the nature of the studies that have been undertaken and the pool of literature about the Khmer Rouge period. When discussing the collective memory of the period, it would be appropriate to keep in mind the point of view under consideration, simply because most, if not all, of the literature available to non-Cambodians has been produced from the point of view of Western foreigners. Books and films abound dealing with the early days of the Khmer Rouge occupation of Phnom Penh, as well as stories that unfolded as the occupation wore on, but these tell overwhelmingly of the experiences of foreigners who happened to be in Phnom Penh at the time of the Khmer Rouge victory.[10] Furthermore, as Osborne comments, "most of the books dealing with the period from 1975 to 1979 focus on experiences after their authors were driven out of Phnom Penh, and many of these are difficult to find" (173). Elizabeth Becker, a journalist in Cambodia at the time, writes

[9] See Becker; Kiernan; and Vickery for more information.
[10] See Osborne 146-147, 167-177 for a concise survey of written and filmic material dealing with the Khmer Rouge period and its aftermath.

in the preface to her book *When the War was Over* that "there were few standard histories of modern Cambodia, much less of the Khmer Rouge, when [she] first wrote this book" (xiv). Also interesting is that on briefly studying some of the most well-known of the historical accounts available, one will come to realise that their authors have generally drawn on each other for inspiration and corroboration.[11] This would point to a homogeneity of accounts rather than a diversity of points of view – therefore when considering the written "history" of the period, it would not hurt to be cautious in questioning the point of view being presented.

Nevertheless, the collective memory resource pool concerning the period, for foreigners, appears to be relatively rich. It is unimaginable that the collective memory of Cambodians themselves should be any less rich; however, much of this memory does not seem to be in written form. Osborne mentions only three memoirs written by Cambodians (174), and one "detailed [account] of life in the capital under Pol Pot" written by the former King Norodom Sihanouk (159) – however this latter example can hardly be considered representative of the voice of the average Cambodian. The ostensible absence of collective memory resources for Cambodians themselves is a very pertinent issue that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

The commonly-held perception amongst foreigners is that Cambodians themselves are overwhelmingly silent about the Khmer Rouge period. The younger generation – those who were born after 1979 – knows

[11] For example, Kiernan quotes Michael Vickery (3), and Becker acknowledges her debt to other writers such as Kiernan, and François Ponchaud (xiv), whose account of the evacuation of Phnom Penh is one of the earliest and most well-known accounts written by a foreigner who experienced the events.

little about it. The subject matter appears not to have been taught to students in schools up till recently (Filloux, "Eyes" 78; Filloux, "Thread II" 63), and children do not believe what their parents relate about life during the period because the horror in those stories seems to them too preposterous and far removed from their current experiences to be true. As such, parents have come to see talking about the period as futile, thus contributing to the overall silence (Prins and van Houte). At the time of writing, however, this situation seems to be changing, as the subject matter is now included in the school syllabus,[12] and a new textbook about the regime has been published by the Documentation Center of Cambodia and distributed on 9 October 2009 to secondary schools in a district of Takeo Province, with plans to extend the project to schools across the country (Saliba). The perceived gap in attempts to actively remember the troubled period can perhaps be explained from psychological and sociological viewpoints, as will be addressed in Chapter 2.2. However, it is important to note that, possibly all along, and especially in the current context, the "silence" surrounding the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia has been somewhat over-emphasised by foreign sources about Cambodia.

More pertinently to this thesis, detailed accounts of the fate that befell the country's performing arts and its performers are, enigmatically, even more difficult to find than general histories about the period. As mentioned earlier, Phim and Thompson, in a book entirely devoted to dance in Cambodia, deal with the Khmer Rouge period and its effect on classical dancers in only a total of three paragraphs. Describing the situation after the

[12] My translator while in Cambodia, Ka Thearith, kindly provided me with this information.

fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, Phim and Thompson write, "people held many ceremonies, just to rejoice in their new-found freedom, inviting dance and theatre troupes to entertain them" (43). Although the focus of the book is admittedly not on the Khmer Rouge period, this picture of an eruption of performance-related activity to celebrate the end of the regime nonetheless seems overly simplistic.

One of the paragraphs dealing with the Khmer Rouge regime in Phim and Thompson's book, however, provides a useful summary of the situation of classical performance:

> When the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh in April 1975, all city residents were forced to evacuate their homes and march to the countryside. Along with other arts, dance of the court tradition was banned. The dancers tried to hide their identities as any connection to the royal court or the previous republican government was reason enough to be singled out by the Khmer Rouge for torture or execution. Many dancers and teachers did not survive the regime. Close to four years of unchecked starvation, disease, hard labour, and family separation also broke the bodies and minds of many who did. (42)

This is corroborated by similar accounts of the evacuation of Phnom Penh by classical dance performers themselves, in TheatreWorks' *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields.* It would seem that the most detailed and poignant accounts of the experiences of performing artists under the regime come from the personal stories revealed in performances by those

who survived the regime, or in related articles about them, rather than in longer texts dealing with Cambodian performance in general.

Similarly, in the section describing *Lakhaon Niyeay* in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, Brandon simply states regarding the Khmer Rouge period that "in 1975 all modern theatre activity ceased when the Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities and made its violent attempt to radically alter Khmer culture and society" (24). Despite the absence of detailed accounts of the regime's effect specifically on performance, it can be deduced from general accounts of the Khmer Rouge's policies that performance was not a tolerated activity under the regime. For example, Becker mentions the "extraordinary Puritanism of the Khmer Rouge" (190), under which all forms of arts and recreation were strictly forbidden.

2.1.3 Post-Khmer Rouge and the Current Situation of Performance in Cambodia

Although the picture described by Phim and Thompson, as mentioned above, of the situation regarding performance following the end of the Khmer Rouge regime might seem overly rosy, it is also fair to say that the performing arts have slowly and gradually seen some resurgence since. "Something of a renaissance came about in the 1980s" (Brandon, *Cambridge* 19) – particularly significant perhaps is the case of *Lakhaon Niyeay* which does not enjoy as much support from the government as classical Khmer performance. Indeed, performance on the whole is not the priority, as would be expected of an economy in the midst of rebuilding itself after the violence and political turmoil that have plagued the country in the past few decades. However, where funding and energy are allocated

to performance at all, these tend to be directed towards Khmer classical dance over other performance forms.[13]

Khmer classical dance was revived after the Khmer Rouge regime under the purview of the National Department of Arts, Ministry of Culture, which established a new National Dance Company led by the few surviving members of the former Royal Cambodian Ballet (Brandon, *Cambridge* 23-24; Phim and Thompson 43). This company performs for state events, festivals, tourists, as well as general audiences, and has also visited other countries on tour (Brandon, *Cambridge* 24). Students now undergo training at the Royal University of Fine Arts (Phim and Thompson 45), and no longer at the Royal Palace. Besides Khmer classical dance, the Royal University of Fine Arts' Department of Dramatic and Choreographic Arts also includes other forms of classical performance such as *Sbek Thom* or shadow puppetry, as well as traditional folk performance and *Lakhaon Niyeay* (Brandon, *Cambridge* 24; Daravuth and Muan 320).

The current state of *Lakhaon Niyeay*, however, seems decidedly pessimistic, according to an interview conducted with director of *Breaking the Silence* Annemarie Prins and dramaturg Nan van Houte. Expressing the bleakness of the situation, Prins states that "the theatre is non-existent. It's more miserable than you can imagine." Of course, "the theatre" in this case refers to the specific form of Western spoken drama, *Lakhaon Niyeay*, and not all forms of performance in general – Prins herself comes from a background of theatre rooted in the Western tradition, and acknowledges her specialisation in Beckett's work. Filloux offers a similar assessment:

[13] I would like to acknowledge Catherine Filloux, Annemarie Prins and Nan van Houte for their observations on this based on their experience working with performance in Cambodia, as conveyed to me in separate personal communications.

"*Lakhaoun Niyeay* . . . is low on the list of priorities and there are currently very few new plays" ("Thread II" 60).

While the extremely gloomy evaluation by foreign practitioners of the state of *Lakhaon Niyeay* in Cambodia should certainly be interpreted with caution, Cambodian practitioners themselves do not appear very much more optimistic about the situation. In an interview, Pich Tum Kravel, one of Cambodia's most prominent playwrights, laments, "when I came back from the Khmer Rouge era, I saw some of my plays all ripped up, being eaten by bugs" (125). His opinion of *Lakhaon Niyeay* today is filled with nostalgic hopelessness: "As far as I know, today there are only very few people who have a real knowledge of *lakhaoun niyeay*. . . . Today *lakhaoun niyeay* is very weak because there are very few people remaining to perform" (126). Pring Sakhon echoes Pich Tum Kravel's sentiments: "There aren't any playwrights or people writing plays really. . . . We lack people to write" (139). Hence, it seems clear that *Lakhaon Niyeay* today is still struggling to recover from the damage it sustained during the Khmer Rouge regime. Cambodians involved in performance bemoan the lack of local talent for the form, validating the observations often made by foreign practitioners.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *Lakhaon Niyeay* has from the beginning carried with it colonialist associations. This instinctively opens up complications in the discussion of *Breaking the Silence* within the performance landscape of Cambodia, and indeed, when considering the troubled development of *Lakhaon Niyeay* at all. The focus on *Lakhaon Niyeay* in this thesis may be a direct consequence of taking *Breaking the*

Silence as its starting point; nonetheless, it will be of interest at this point to briefly include in the picture other forms of "spoken theatre" apart from *Lakhaon Niyeay*. These forms often remain unnoticed or unconsidered by non-Cambodian practitioners working in Cambodia, simply because of their unfamiliarity. The single-minded focus on *Lakhaon Niyeay*, of which *Breaking the Silence* is an example, could therefore be called into question as a manifestation of the cultural politics surrounding current theatre practice in Cambodia, as other valuable forms of "spoken theatre" in Cambodia continue to be relatively neglected by foreign practitioners engaging in developmental or participatory theatre work in Cambodia.

The English term "spoken theatre" tends to carry a very limited meaning inappropriate for describing Asian performance forms, which often combine music, dance, and spoken or sung dialogue in ways that defy categorisation according to Western terms. Brandon in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* is confusingly ambiguous in classifying the Cambodian forms of *Yike* and *Lakhaon Bassac* as "modern popular forms" (22), then as "classical performance" (24), and then again as "spoken drama" (25), exemplifying the difficulty of describing these forms according to Western theatre terminology. The point in highlighting this difficulty, however, is to suggest that *Yike* and *Lakhaon Bassac*, influenced by Thai and Chinese-Vietnamese popular performance forms respectively, perhaps encompass characteristics of all the above classifications. Specifically, it is logical to consider them to be "spoken" forms of theatre or drama, as they both incorporate segments of dialogue – in *Yike* performers improvise dialogue, while *Lakhaon Bassac* carries the influence

of Chinese opera. Furthermore, these forms, according to Brandon, are "extremely popular with contemporary audiences" (*Cambridge* 24), with "several hundred amateur troupes exist[ing]" across the country in 1992 (25). Therefore, given the supposed popularity of forms like *Yike* and *Lakhaon Bassac* with the general Cambodian audience, the fervent efforts of foreign theatre practitioners, which usually tend towards developing *Lakhaon Niyeay* performances, might perhaps be validly questioned.

In this light, the role of *Breaking the Silence* in the development of *Lakhaon Niyeay*, and its part in the collective memory process of Cambodia are complex issues that will be discussed later in Chapter 3. The following chapter, Chapter 2.2, goes on to give an overview of studies and observations in the field of collective memory, highlighting those most pertinent to this thesis' concern with the collective memory of Cambodia, and the use of performance to deal with it.

2.2 Collective Memory

2.2.1 Collective Memory – the Theoretical Basis

The term "collective memory", rather than designating a clear field of study, is highly ambiguous; therefore a treatment of its definitions and connotations within different academic fields is in order before progressing further. The founding of collective memory studies is generally attributed to Maurice Halbwachs, who, writing in French in the 1920's, postulated that "a 'collective memory' – as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past – is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share" (cited in Irwin-Zarecka 4). Wertsch also acknowledges Halbwachs' pioneering work in the field (19, 22), discussing at some length the critiques that later writers have engaged in with Halbwachs' assertions. A common thread running through the analyses of both writers is that while Halbwachs doubtlessly deserves attention in any consideration of collective memory, the discussion has been taken up and greatly expanded in more recent debates (Irwin-Zarecka 21; Wertsch 19).

Wertsch stresses that collective memory is primarily "textually mediated" – the existence of various "narrative texts" about past events, periods and so forth, in the plethora of media outlets available to us today, in school textbooks, as well as word of mouth transmission at home and in the community, accounts for the ability of people who have never experienced a past event to have a "memory" of it (4-5). Obviously, this "memory" does not refer to the personal memory of an individual; rather it is the combined resources related to the event, which the individual has access to, that influences and shapes his or her thoughts and feelings about

the particular event. It is seldom a conscious acknowledgement that learning about and forming opinions regarding past events occur through mediated sources, such that people whose experiences may be far removed from an actual event often recount versions of the event as if they were the facts. Wertsch illustrates this with the example of a Russian high school student in 1997, who gives his account of World War II with firm confidence despite not having been born till well after the conclusion of the war (4-5).

The focus of discussion on collective memory often differs depending on the field from which it is being approached. In a study employing semiotic analysis, for example, preponderance would be given to the idea that any narrative text is subject to the constraints of organisation of the language in which it is written. Since collective memory, if understood as described above, is based on narrative texts that recount historical events, it thus follows that collective memory would be influenced by language at the very basic level of the composition of the text (Wertsch 14-15). It should be noted that Wertsch derives his idea of "text" from the writings of Yuri Lotman and Mikhail Bakhtin: "from this perspective, text is viewed as a basic organizing unit that structures meaning, communication, and thought" (Wertsch 14). A text is, therefore, any source of information which an individual may access and from which his or her collective memory of an event or situation may derive. This thesis, although not using a semiotic approach, borrows parts of Wertsch's framework to a large extent, seeing collective memory as composed of

sources mostly of a narrative nature, from which an individual draws his or her information.

In psychology, the function of memory tends to be stressed as the accurate description of the past, whereas in fields like history, sociology and anthropology, weight is more often given to the role of memory "in rhetorical and political processes concerned with identity and a usable past" (Wertsch 32). However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that regardless of the point of view being subscribed to, both the above functions of memory are relevant to some extent, rather than being mutually exclusive. The above considerations of some of the fields under which memory has been discussed illustrate the disparate nature of discussions on collective memory and the different academic traditions to which collective memory studies owes its evolution.

The nature of this thesis steers it towards an admittedly more sociological view, in the sense that its concern with the use of performance to deal with collective memory carries the implication that issues like identity and politics are relevant to the people whom this collective memory concerns. Indeed, many of the examples of performance being used to address collective memory mentioned in the Introduction, such as those arising out of the Holocaust, have much to do with the formation and negotiation of the identity of a certain group of people.

It is important also to consider what Wertsch terms "voice," again in relation to a Bakhtinian point of view (15-17). When a version of events is being recounted by an individual, it is not only that individual who is doing the speaking or remembering, but a whole collective that may

include the specific source from which the individual received his or her information, and more general attitudes towards or beliefs about the event that dominate the individual's encounters with mediated resources. Furthermore, the audience being addressed will also shape the individual's text or speech, as no text is created in a vacuum – the nature of a narrative text presupposes an audience, and hence will necessarily be crafted with that audience in mind, even if on a subconscious level. Three distinct "voices" can thus be discerned – the unique voice of the individual recounting the event at that specific moment in time, that of the collective of resources that the individual draws upon, and that of the audience.[14]

It may have been noticed that the hypothetical individual recounting a version of events has been described as "remembering" – this is a crucial point, as "collective memory" may perhaps be better termed in most cases "collective remembering", reflecting that the phenomenon being examined here is a process rather than an entity. Thoughts, ideas, and attitudes are continually being debated, formulated and reformulated through mediated sources. In many of the specific groups or societies which are often studied in relation to collective memory, such as the Jewish diaspora and other communities currently or recently engaged in civil war or political upheaval, the process of negotiation is still very much an ongoing one and may continue for several decades to come. The term "collective memory" is thus used in this thesis, to keep in line with the usual term for the concept; however, the continual, ongoing nature of the process should always be borne in mind.

[14] See Bakhtin, *Dialogic*; and Bakhtin, *Speech* for details on Bakhtin's original articulation of the discussed concepts.

As indicated above, this thesis takes an understanding of collective memory that resonates with that of Wertsch – the basic idea being that individuals remember with the aid of "cultural tools" (12-13). As mentioned before, these cultural tools may include any number of mediated sources, and it would be appropriate to note that especially in today's world, the influence of the internet and the ubiquity of online sources play a substantial role in the sustaining of collective memory. As Whitehead notes, "[Huyssen] links memory's resurgence to the development of new media technologies, which engender an accelerated form of temporality with their instant entertainment, frenetic pace, and quick oblivion" (1). If one only considers the rise in citizen journalism[15] in recent years, it becomes clear how the points of view of many individuals can all be simultaneously and instantaneously given a space in the virtual arena, collectively becoming a continuously developing resource for, and influence upon, anyone looking to be informed about any particular event.

While all part of the larger process of collective memory, the distinction between cultural tools produced by and for the general public, as in citizen journalism above, and those produced, regulated, or otherwise officially sanctioned by a higher, organised body such as the state, is an important one to make. Related, but not entirely the same, is the dominant point of view that comes across in official, or the most readily available, sources, as opposed to the undercurrents of dissenting views that run alongside official ones. The effect of a particular point of view can lead to a

[15] Mark Glaser describes citizen journalism thus: "the idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others."

particular version of events being “remembered”, or “selective amnesia”, to use a parallel. A case in point would be the German collective memory of World War II, within which references to Auschwitz are deliberately left out (Irwin-Zarecka 50).

In her study, Irwin-Zarecka focuses on an example probably given relatively less attention – the general Polish attitude towards the Holocaust, which tends to view the Nazi occupation as a tragedy for Poland as a whole, rather than recognising the loss of its Jewish population specifically and addressing issues of accountability on the part of non-Jewish Poles for that loss (49). This is despite the observation, which Irwin-Zarecka makes, that “in the country where so many of the European Jews perished, remembering the Holocaust may at first appear not to need any justification” (37). The reasons why it has indeed been so difficult for Poles to acknowledge and start to come to terms with remembering the Polish Jews are dealt with in Irwin-Zarecka’s book, and are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, as an example of the extremely complicated nature that collective memory can take, the case of Poland sheds some light on Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge regime. In a case where so many different groups of people and points of view are involved, there lies great difficulty in encouraging memory of the period, simply because doing so usually implies promoting one version of events over others, at least from an official standpoint. Clearly this cannot be satisfactory for all who have suffered, for different reasons. This will be addressed in relation to the discussions of *Breaking the Silence* and the collective memory of Cambodia as the thesis progresses.

2.2.2 Collective Memory and Cambodia

It will be valid to question why it would be appropriate to look at collective memory in the Cambodian context at this particular point in time. A psychological and a sociological perspective seem to converge on a similar conclusion: that the current decade would indeed, theoretically, see an upsurge in attempts to deal with memories of the Khmer Rouge period. It has been documented in psychology that there is typically a twenty-five-year period between a traumatic episode and efforts to remember or commemorate it, through the building of monuments, making films, and so forth (Pennebaker and Banasik 12; Igartua and Paez 79). Several possible explanations have been suggested for this twenty-five-year lapse. Firstly, it may simply reflect the time needed for the community involved to gain the psychological distance that enables them to confront the conflicts and emotions aroused by the troubling episode. Secondly, it may reflect the time taken for the gathering of sufficient resources to be invested into the commemoration effort. Thirdly, and related to the preceding point, it has been posited that events occurring during early adulthood tend to most significantly impact a person's life (Pennebaker and Banasik 14; Wertsch 40). Hence it is this group of people who, around twenty-five years later, have grown older, have an interest in commemorating the event, and amassed the resources to do so. Lastly, and especially relevant to political regimes, it is perhaps after this period of time has passed, when most of the perpetrators of the oppression, violence, and so forth, "have either socially or physically disappeared", that more open discussion can take place (Igartua and Paez 84).

Coming from a more sociological perspective, Irwin-Zarecka suggests that it may be necessary for a generation's time to have passed "for a troubling past to become an openly contested terrain" (74). She reasons that the children of those who were directly involved in the difficult experience are the ones who would actively start to discuss and reflect on the collective past, being far removed enough from the experiences themselves but yet close enough to the survivors to gain first hand information.

It is possible to see how both perspectives might apply to the case of Cambodia. Approximately twenty to thirty years have elapsed between the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and the current decade. Although this may be slightly less than a generation's time, it would nevertheless not be unreasonable to suggest that the current decade should see the beginnings of more open or active initiatives to remember and discuss the period. That all three case studies of or relating to performance dealt with in this thesis – Hamera's ethnographical study of a family of dancers, *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*, and *Breaking the Silence* – were undertaken in this decade, can be taken to support the above assertion.

Attitudes towards the memory of a past event also change over time. Wertsch draws attention to the fact that changing historical perspectives have resulted in changes to the collective memory of the Holocaust in the United States over the years (45-46). Such changes are influenced by and necessarily part of the prevailing social and cultural outlook at any point in time, which are constantly in flux. For example, Irwin-Zarecka mentions that during the 1980's, amidst proposals for the establishment of the

Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the responsibility for remembering the Holocaust came to be recognised as universal, whereas just a decade earlier, the underlying attitude was that remembering the Holocaust was mainly the province of the Jews (8). Changes in collective memory also reflect each successive generation's different relationship with the memory in question; their means of addressing or dealing with the memory being dependent on the particularities of the milieu in which they live.

Hence, it should only be expected that collective memory in Cambodia be in constant flux as well, in accord with the changing of the times. An increase in attempts to deal with the memory of the Khmer Rouge regime may reflect a recognition of the need to somehow come to terms with that troubled past while rebuilding the country and bringing about more hope for the future. There seems to be evidence that the younger generation of Cambodians – current school students – is open to and interested in learning more about the period. An article in the Phnom Penh Post reports on the general interest of students, quoting one student's comment: "I am happy if I can learn about it because I am afraid of foreign youths or students asking me, and it will be shameful if I cannot answer their questions about the Khmer Rouge" (Mom). The same article also mentions teachers and personnel of the Ministry of Education encouraging students to read and learn as much as they can about the Khmer Rouge period. Hence, it is apparent that collective memory in Cambodia, if characterised by the reluctance to discuss the period before, is changing in

nature, with current increasing efforts to involve the younger generation in discussions.

Having laid out the theoretical basis for the rest of the thesis, the discussion now turns in the next chapter to two case studies related to using performance to deal with the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge regime.

2.3 Performance as a Means of Addressing Collective Memory

As has been described in Chapter 2.2, Wertsch posits that all collective memory is textually mediated. Taking Wertsch's idea as its basis, this chapter analyses two sources which carry performance as a central theme – a study by Judith Hamera of a family of Cambodian migrants to Long Beach, California, and a production by Singaporean theatre company TheatreWorks entitled *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*. Both, dealing in one way or another with the Khmer Rouge period, can be seen as part of the collective of sources contributing to the collective memory of the period, each affecting how the period is remembered in however small a way. In both cases, the "memory" shaped would tend to be that of the foreign observer rather than Cambodians themselves, due to the audience towards which both are geared, as will be discussed later in this chapter. This is a different orientation from that of *Breaking the Silence*, and it will therefore be interesting to observe how collective memory works from different points of view.

The analysis of the two sources in this chapter concentrates on how performance can be, and has been, used to deal with the difficult memory of the Khmer Rouge period by performers themselves. Despite being geared towards foreign audiences, both are concerned with a personal search for meaning in the lives of individual Cambodians who practise Khmer classical dance, and for whom dance is inextricably linked to that search for meaning. In this respect, too, both these cases differ from *Breaking the Silence*, which is not so much introspective on the part of the performers, but rather, hopes to inspire the entire Cambodian community to

make peace with themselves and each other, as will be addressed in detail in the following chapter. It should also be clarified that "meaning," as mentioned above, and as generally used throughout this thesis, refers not to the meaning of a particular performance, which, it is accepted, would be a somewhat superfluous question. Rather, of interest is the meaning of performance in a wider sense, as part of the lives of those who practise it, and for those who come into contact with it as audience members. Particular examples of performance, or in the case of Hamera's ethnographical work, performance-related studies examined in this thesis, are sources contributing to collective memory. What these sources reveal about performance and its meaning for performers and the audience would then shed light on the value of using performance to deal with collective memory.

The study by Judith Hamera constitutes a chapter in her book, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City*. It paints a comparatively gloomy and poignant picture of the place of performance in the lives of the Sem family – the parents Ben and May, and their son and two daughters – who have migrated to the United States through a refugee camp on the Thai border. Hamera details how using their art as a means to justify their survival and to find meaning in life after the regime ultimately proves unsuccessful for them, resulting in frustration and hopelessness rather than peace and fulfillment. The TheatreWorks production seems to have a more ambivalent tone, raising questions about the impact of the Khmer Rouge regime on Cambodia's performing arts without proffering any answers. Yet the dancer Em Theay,

around whom the production revolves, is shown to have derived meaning in life from her art, and the overall picture painted seems to be much more optimistic than is shown to be the case for the subjects in Hamera's study.

2.3.1 Judith Hamera: Ethnographical Study of the Sem Family

Hamera's chapter is thought-provoking not least because of the general insights it gives into trauma and memory. A caveat must be mentioned, however: the word "trauma" here is used very carefully, because of its obvious associations with psychoanalysis, as Hamera herself points out (139). Christina Wald, in her introduction to trauma in theatre, writes, "since its application to psychology in the late nineteenth century, trauma . . . has described the long-lasting psychic effects of an event that is so overpowering that the subject is unable to respond to it adequately at the moment of occurrence (2). While applicable to all psychologically troubling events, including wars and natural disasters, trauma has, however, come to be used overwhelmingly in reference to events of a sexual nature. Wald also notes the perhaps excessive use of trauma as a "cultural trope," which has almost rendered it meaningless (3). With these complications in mind, I use the term only in the context of Hamera's discussion, largely avoiding its use in the rest of the thesis, in order to distance the discussion from psychoanalytic connotations, with which this thesis is not concerned.

The complications surrounding collective memory and academic discussions of it have been described in Chapter 2.2. The various conflicting points of view involved in a single situation render it extremely difficult for a clear and straightforward narrative thread to be woven.

Hamera terms this phenomenon “crises of truth”, which prevent even the usually liberating analytical frame of performance from transcending the difficulties of coming to terms with a traumatic memory (140). Performance is often a tool used to address difficult topics that could not otherwise be discussed directly due to official or unofficial censorship, under the veil of metaphor. In the case of the Sem family, however, their life experiences have clearly been so painful and frustrating that performance offers neither explanation nor solace.

In a very revealing phrase, Hamera sums up the fear imposed on Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge: “the Khmer Rouge enforced a tyranny of forgetting”, by destroying monuments and artefacts, and attempting to eradicate all manifestations of culture (142). What the Khmer Rouge failed to realise, of course, was that cultural memory is much too deeply rooted in the psyche of a people to be erased simply by removing monuments and officially denying culture. Gay McAuley proposes a “feral memory syndrome”, a term to describe undercurrents of memory that run parallel to the officially sanctioned stance, narratives not recognised or even forbidden by the authorities, but nevertheless holding much credence amongst the general populace. She argues that challenges to official versions of narratives “persist precisely because of the attempt to suppress them and that the proliferation of lurid anecdotes is a response to . . . official silence” (165). If this described the situation under the control of the Khmer Rouge, it also applies to more recent times, post-Khmer Rouge, where strong censorship and “official silence” on the Khmer Rouge and their atrocities would logically be assumed to translate to non-mention of the subject in

public or by the media. However, this does not mean that the period has been forgotten – far from that, the Khmer Rouge occupation and its legacy are what constantly haunt the memories of the Cambodians who lived through it, as the case of the Sem family clearly shows. The pain and trauma brought on and left behind by the regime are irreversibly part of Cambodia's collective memory, the "feral memory" that cannot simply be forgotten or erased regardless of official attitudes.

The main premise of Hamera's study on the Sem family can be understood as such: since survival appears to be completely random and inexplicable, survivors of the regime are often struck with feelings of survivor guilt. To deal with such feelings, survivors who practise an art tend to use their art as a justification for their survival, thinking of themselves as somehow having been designated by fate to continue practising and preserving their art form and ensure its continuity into the next generation and beyond. This is especially pertinent in the context of the Cambodian "cultural fetish", according to which Khmer culture is viewed "as rooted in a sacred, utopian past, mired in a degenerate present" (Hamera 150).

Ben and May, both trained in Khmer classical dance but to different degrees, are clearly plagued by such feelings of "answerability", and see it as their responsibility to promote and preserve Khmer culture. Ben's description of artists and dancers as being "like jewels", and comparison of great dancers to "a library" that the Khmer Rouge has destroyed (Hamera 151), reveals his high esteem for dancers and deep regret at the blow sustained by the Khmer classical dance tradition as a result of the regime.

More significantly, the scant hope of continuation in his children's generation is especially troubling for Ben. His frustration and despair at his children's disinterest in classical dance is clear – Hamera writes that Ben on one rare occasion "acknowledge[s] this break in the generational chain of answerability he seemed to want so desperately" (157), which is consequential taking into account Ben's usual reticence. The self-imposed responsibility to pass on the tradition to the next generation, which has proven to be beyond his power, has led to immense pressure on Ben, which translates to and manifests itself as highly temperamental behaviour.

May's attitude is slightly different, although, like with Ben, despair and confusion are also clearly discernable. At the same time, however, May sees dance as a way of negotiating "things that could not otherwise be said" (Hamera 162). In her exchanges with Hamera, May is reluctant to talk directly about darker issues like her time spent in the refugee camp or her present life, but is willing to talk about dance, through which Hamera may indirectly learn about May's other experiences. For May at least, Khmer classical dance seems to be a metaphorical safety blanket – steeped in legend and ritual, and seen as beautiful and unchanging (Hamera 153-154), dance is therefore a safe and knowable entity that May clings to amidst the hopelessness of real life. Unfortunately, this strategy does not seem to work satisfactorily. When May practises her dance exercises at home, the image described by Hamera is poignant and sad:

> There was certainly a profoundly lyrical beauty in these spare and elegant gestures, but what struck me most forcefully was how May regarded her hands as she executed

> each movement. Her face was blank. This was not the sweet, otherworldly gaze of the Apsara, with its gentle half-smile. It was not an expression of concentration, but rather of a sad and detached weariness. (167-168)

May's attempt to find certainty and safety in her art, while ignoring or evading her troubling experiences, proves to be largely inadequate, for reasons which will be elaborated on below.

As discussed above, the lack of generational continuity in their art form is a source of frustration and hopelessness for Ben and May Sem. Not being able to live up to their perceived responsibilities of passing on the tradition, the attempt to use performance as the justification for their survival of the Khmer Rouge regime is undermined. However, the feelings of hopelessness and lack of fulfillment are further fueled by other factors. In May's case, her own technical limitations exacerbate the problem – May admits on her own accord, "I am not good dancer" (147). Hamera also observes that "the limits of May's training, her age, and the residues of trauma and hard work conspired to keep the classic 'beautiful hand' out of reach" (168). If May believed that being "chosen" to preserve the art of Khmer classical dance were the reason behind her survival, her technical limitations would undoubtedly be a huge source of stress, as even more intensely would she feel that she was not living up to the expectations thrust upon her in exchange for living through the regime that killed most of Cambodia's dancers. The fact that she continues practising her dance exercises at home despite the obvious feelings of inadequacy that she directly expresses, indicates May's continuous striving for improvement, to

perhaps somehow justify being "chosen," however futile she knows her attempts to be.

Furthermore, in what has led to a vicious cycle, Ben and May demonstrate a reluctance to attend classical dance performances among the Cambodian diasporic community in California, despite the availability of opportunities to do so (Hamera 168-169). Their deliberate distancing of themselves from the Cambodian performing community in California due to feelings of inadequacy only serves to feed the hopelessness and despair, since it causes their isolation from potential friends and acquaintances that would conceivably contribute to their psychological well-being.

A final aspect of Hamera's study that could be illuminating for the purposes of this thesis is her self-reflexive awareness – she acknowledges near the beginning of her article that she doubts her own "instruments", "both theoretical and interpersonal" (140). This is crucial because the kind of work that Hamera is engaged in for this study involves deliberately bringing to the forefront extremely troubling memories, possibly provoking painful thoughts and stirring up emotions for the family that she studied and interviewed. In such a study, a certain degree of subjectivity is inevitable, from a theoretical point of view.

From an ethical point of view, however, the implications are perhaps even more consequential. As the Sem family did not prove forthcoming on details about their background, Hamera attempts to shed more light on their ambiguous circumstances by consulting archives and records. She however admits that she has "always rather shamefully considered [this] a 'detective operation' to ferret out some simple 'truth'"

(141), indicating her awareness that such probing into the private lives of others bears ethical consideration. Furthermore, she acknowledges that the family's reception of her and attitude towards her over the period of her study were ambivalent, although her presence and company seemed to be beneficial to May, who otherwise led a life considerably isolated from interaction with others in her neighbourhood or community (162). The extent to which such intrusion in the lives of others in the name of scholarship is ethical is difficult to determine. Without clear guidelines in place for what is considered appropriate, it is up to researchers dealing with such sensitive issues to proceed according to their own judgement. Indeed, given that each case is unique and personal emotions should never be treated lightly, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest the impossibility of fixing generalised guidelines. Nevertheless, the implications of using personal memories as material, be it for academic research as in Hamera's case, or for performance in the other cases that I will consider, while complicated, should not be ignored. This thesis, being concerned with the use of performance to deal with collective memory, would evidently not be exempt from scrutiny in the above respect – an issue which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.3.

2.3.2 TheatreWorks: *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*

As another source that takes as its subject matter the Khmer Rouge regime and its impact on Khmer classical dance, the TheatreWorks production *Beyond the Killing Fields* offers a view that is complementary in some ways, yet different from the bleak picture painted of the Sem

family in the previous case. Being concerned to a large extent with performance itself, this production offers many insights on the level of a meta-performance. As a specific example of a performance piece about "Cambodia's recent past and the process of four Cambodians using their art to come to terms with that past today" (Orenstein 393), this production also provides ground for comparison with the main case study of this thesis, *Breaking the Silence*.

Conceived and directed by Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen, and produced by TheatreWorks, *Beyond the Killing Fields* premiered at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas, Yale University, USA, in June 2001 (TheatreWorks). Since then, it has toured a substantial list of cities: Berlin, Rotterdam, Vienna, Singapore, Phnom Penh, London, Stockholm and Oslo. The cast includes five performers – four Cambodians trained in classical Khmer performance, and one Singaporean who takes on the role of researcher, interviewer and videographer. As a self-styled "Docuperformance" or "documentary performance" (TheatreWorks), the production centres around Em Theay, sometimes called the "'tenth' dancer" ("Cambodia's 'Tenth Dancer'"), a reference to the statistics – that nine of out ten Khmer classical dancers perished during the Khmer Rouge regime. Although the production tells her story, from the circumstances surrounding her life when the Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh to the present, it does so in a non-linear way. The performance opens with a video clip showing the *sampeah kru* ceremony that Em Theay holds immediately before leaving Phnom Penh to start work on this production – this is "a ritual honoring deities, spirits, and teachers that is often enacted

by dancers before they undertake a new project or learn a new role" (Orenstein 394). It then moves back and forth along the timeline of Em Theay's life, but also intersperses other stories, of other civilians and their tribulations during the regime.

Traditional Cambodian performance forms play a large role in the production, which employs Khmer classical dance and *Sbek Thom* or shadow puppetry segments performed by the trained Cambodian performers, interspersed with straightforward narration and video projections. This focus on traditional performance is a crucial aspect of the production, given its orientation towards documenting the Khmer Rouge regime with specific respect to Khmer classical performance and performers. *Beyond the Killing Fields* not only reiterates the devastating effect of the regime on Cambodia's classical performance heritage, but also attempts to show that this heritage has not been completely destroyed, living on in the bodies of dancers like Em Theay and her daughters. Despite the numbing horror of the stories told during the production about life during the regime, the message ultimately seems to be a hopeful one – emphasising and celebrating the value of Khmer classical performance and the importance of its continuity. The approach taken to project this message will now be explored.

What strikes the audience at the outset is that the art is simply let to speak for itself. The production opens straight into a long video segment showing the *sampeah kru* ceremony that Em Theay holds in Cambodia with the participation of her students. This video clip is introduced only with the caption: "Sampeah Kru: Honouring our teachers." As the clip progresses,

explanatory captions are sparingly inserted giving more information about the meaning of the ceremony and its various associated aspects and traditions. However, this remains limited and for the most part the audience watches the video of the ceremony as it is. The audience is also introduced to Khmer classical dance, as a substantial amount of time in the clip is devoted to showing the dancers who perform at the ceremony, including Em Theay herself, and her students whom she corrects as they perform. This clip is approximately thirteen minutes long in a two-hour performance – a considerable amount of time given its rather enigmatic framing, somewhat like an introduction to the performance proper, yet with such sparse explanatory support that it could perhaps be better described as a prelude. Yet it presents so much visual information at once, about Khmer classical dance and its inextricable link to tradition and spiritual beliefs, that it is also very much part of the performance. Regardless, it is the economy of explanation that stands out, perhaps as a preliminary indication of the value of the art in itself.

By dealing with the troubling nature of memories concerning the Khmer Rouge period in a deliberately prosaic manner, *Beyond the Killing Fields* effectively drives in the pain and horror, rather than tiptoeing around the subject. Immediately after the *sampeah kru* segment, for example, the Cambodian performers begin recounting personal stories about life during the Khmer Rouge regime. The performers relate their stories in a reserved and serious manner, and although appearing to become emotional at points, never let themselves be overcome by the emotion or allow it to dominate their performance. Taking turns, each performer tells a different story,

leaving off at an uncertain point. The stories are then picked up by the respective performers again not long after the beginning of Act 2. It is not clear, however, whether the performers are recounting their own life stories or those of adopted personas. Nevertheless, told with such understated emotions, the stories are not framed as particular to any one person, but reflecting the general state of events at the time. The realisation that such painful experiences happened to anyone and everyone living through the regime renders them even more poignant.

The recounting of personal stories in the production also raises more questions and frustrations rather than offering any hint of their resolution. The stories are related in a matter-of-fact way, without much accompanying judgement or commentary. Personal feelings or opinions are allowed to come through at the end, for instance, in one of the women's stories where she talks about having lost her four-year-old daughter and husband during the regime and later remarrying so that she could have more children "just to make up for [her] lost daughter." She comments at the end of her story that she feels she has made two big mistakes in her life – both inadvertent mistakes that led to the deaths of her daughter and husband respectively. This personal admission is shared with the audience, but the story ends at that – there is no closure, no sense of whether she has been able to find peace with herself or otherwise.

Interspersed with the recounting of these personal stories are segments of dance and *Sbek Thom*. For example, Act 2 contains a sequence where two dancers demonstrate how selected actions and emotions are

represented for the Male role and the Giant role respectively,[16] such as walking, seeing, love, anger and joy. This sequence is punctuated with another personal story about the regime, narrated by another performer while the two dancers continue with the demonstrations. The actions and emotions being demonstrated correspond roughly to the trajectory of the story being narrated at the same time, about a pregnant wife and her husband who make the painful decision to abort their baby because of their dire living conditions during the regime. This juxtaposition of the upsetting story with the beauty and grace of the dance moves intensifies the idea that the means to deal with the painful memories, the power to overcome the persistent grief, somehow lies with dance.

As can be seen, *Beyond the Killing Fields* presents in a much more positive light the potential for performance to be used to deal with difficult memories of the regime, than was the case for the Sem family in Hamera's study. In an interview in a BBC News article, Em Theay articulates what so many survivors find extremely difficult to come to terms with – the very inexplicability of their survival: "I was not intellectual, I was not a more well-known artist than my other friends – and I was working as hard as my other friends, I ate as little as my other friends – but they all died, and I stayed as a wife" ("Cambodia's 'Tenth Dancer'"). However, unlike the Sem family, it would seem that for Em Theay, her art is a source of hope and comfort for her, and at least plays a relatively significant role in helping her to cope. She describes *Beyond the Killing Fields* as "very

[16] Khmer classical dance is generally divided into four "roles", or character types – the Male role, Female role, Ogre or Giant role and Monkey role. Dancers are selected for specific roles from childhood according to their body shape and size, and usually only learn and practise their designated role from then on (Phim and Thompson 36, 46).

emotional, but also it's a journey of discovering my real inside – because I never wanted to say what was going on in my real life to anybody" ("Cambodia's 'Tenth Dancer'"). This production, then, through the means of performance, has enabled her to speak about her experience and helped her to better come to terms with it.

While this production would seem to present performance as a therapeutic means to help deal with difficult memories, certain criticisms can also be raised concerning the production structure and the ethics behind such a production. An obvious observation would be that the production is about Cambodian collective memory, and performed almost fully by a Cambodian cast, but directed and produced by a Singaporean theatre company. The implications are even more interesting considering the particular theatre company in question, TheatreWorks. An in-depth analysis of the works of Ong Keng Sen, director of TheatreWorks, would be better reserved for a separate discussion. However, it is useful to point out a reservation here, namely that Ong's other projects in explicitly intercultural performance have tended to come under criticism for operating too closely along the global market economy, putting productions together using creative and technical expertise from different locations around the world in much the same way as globalised industrial production, and then marketing the performance as "intercultural" (Bharucha 20).

More crucial perhaps, and not unrelated, is the question of the audience towards which this production is oriented. Although, ostensibly, "the company's hope is to take the piece back to Cambodia where it might serve in the nation's ongoing struggle to address a painful past" (Orenstein

395), since its premiere in the USA it has played only one run in Phnom Penh, in contrast with a list of other cities all in Europe, with the exception of Singapore. Furthermore, the language used in Orenstein's review of the production in the USA is revealing: "The director allows the audience to hear the beautiful lilt of the Cambodian language throughout" (395). The use of "the Cambodian language" – Khmer – in the relating of the personal stories, presumably a calculated choice, cannot be for the purposes of addressing a Cambodian audience given the cities visited by the production. English subtitles are employed most of the time when the performers speak Khmer, except for Em Theay's speeches, which are interpreted, in English, line by line by another performer on stage. Hence, it seems quite clear that the production is geared towards a non-Cambodian, English-speaking audience, but deliberately uses Khmer to achieve an effect of exoticising distance – the "beautiful lilt" described by Orenstein.

It would not be unreasonable to observe, in light of the above, that the production seems to fall somewhat into the trap of constituting another "Instant Asia"[17] enterprise (Bharucha 23) – a cultural appropriation based mainly on stereotypes, marketed to Western audiences on the basis of its exotic appeal, while holding little or no meaning for the culture being represented. The grave subject matter of *Beyond the Killing Fields* and the respect for Khmer classical performance evident in the production of course render it undeserving of such an extreme judgement, but the question still remains of the value and benefit of the production to

[17] Used as a criticism of Ong's intercultural work such as *Lear* and *Desdemona* by another Singaporean director, Alvin Tan, "Instant Asia" has since been expanded to apply more widely to cultural appropriation and essentialism, especially to project a certain image of "Asia," mainly in the theatrical context of Singapore.

Cambodians themselves. Even granting that the production from the point of view of TheatreWorks may not have had an explicit aim to directly participate in Cambodia's process of coming to terms with its painful memories, it would be reasonable to ask what good telling Em Theay's story to a predominantly Western audience ultimately did for Em Theay herself and her family. Although Em Theay's comments to BBC seem very inspiring and optimistic – "I want to tell my Cambodian people, as well as the whole world, that togetherness is very important" ("Cambodia's 'Tenth Dancer'") – when viewed alongside the hopelessness and despair of the Sem family one cannot help but entertain a degree of scepticism.

The discussion in this chapter has considered two different cases of using performance to deal with the troubling memories of the Khmer Rouge regime, one presenting a more optimistic view than the other. The discussion has revealed some of the possible issues that arise from the use of performance to deal with collective memory, specific to the Cambodian context, such as the possible futility of the undertaking for some, and the cultural and political implications of non-Cambodian performance practitioners using the personal memories of survivors of the regime as part of their artistic practices. It will be useful to bear these in mind while the discussion turns to the production of *Breaking the Silence*.

Chapter 3: The Case of *Breaking the Silence*

3.1 Introducing *Breaking the Silence*

3.1.1 Introduction and Brief Production Process

Breaking the Silence was first performed on 21 and 22 February 2009 in Phnom Penh, after which the production undertook a tour of several provinces surrounding Phnom Penh, playing eight performances in total over the period 25 February to 11 March 2009 (McGrane; Prins and Martens). As mentioned in the Introduction, at the time of writing, a second province tour is scheduled for 3 to 13 February 2010, with a run of ten performances, as well as the recording of the performance in the format of a radio play (Suon). The medium of radio has been identified as a powerful and economical tool to reach audiences that cannot be reached by touring alone, especially since touring a full scale production puts huge strains on the budget. It is hoped that the radio play will be heard by a targeted audience of four million people, especially the illiterate segment of the population (Prins and van Houte).

Annemarie Prins, the director of *Breaking the Silence*, is an experienced practitioner in the Netherlands, having "directed theater, modern opera, film, television and radio" (Prins). The inspiration for the project of *Breaking the Silence* can be said to have arisen in 2004, when Prins was invited by Fred Frumberg, executive director of Amrita Performing Arts, to give a workshop to theatre teachers at the Royal University of Fine Arts (Prins). This workshop was also where Prins first met the four actresses who were to perform in *Breaking the Silence*, five years on.

In the following year, the opportunity arose for Prins to collaborate with three of the teacher-actresses she had worked with at the initial workshop – Morm Sokly, Kov Sotheary and Chhon Sina – on a play entitled *3 Years, 8 Months, 20 Days*. This play was based on the childhood stories of the actresses themselves, who were all around ten years of age during the Khmer Rouge regime, and had begun sharing their memories of the period with Prins during the workshop (Prins and van Houte). *3 Years, 8 Months, 20 Days* played two performances in Phnom Penh in a small theatre, and was also presented at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2007. Realising, however, that these prior efforts would reach a limited Cambodian audience, Prins then conceived the idea of working on a performance intended mainly for Cambodian audiences instead of the expatriate and international tour audiences that such projects tend to be geared towards.

In January 2008, Prins, together with Nan van Houte, the production's dramaturge, undertook a research trip to Cambodia, linking up with the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), who provided crucial background information about the subject matter and helped to identify possible individuals living in the provinces who could be interviewed for source material. The approximately fifteen interviews then conducted by the production team with people of both affiliations – former Khmer Rouge soldiers as well as civilian victims of the regime – formed the basis for the seven short stories that finally appear as *Breaking the Silence*.

Returning to the Netherlands, Prins put together the play from the testimonies that had been collected, incorporating also songs and poems by Cambodian poets, most notably U Sam Oeur (Prins and van Houte), who lived through the regime and currently resides in the United States. The text of the play was thus mostly completed before work on the production began in Phnom Penh. Hence, although there are grounds for considering *Breaking the Silence* a TfD project, as mentioned in the Introduction, the production probably deviates from most definitions of community theatre, since local performers were for the most part not directly involved in the artistic process of devising the performance. Nevertheless, the collaboration with Cambodian performers and production team members, the conscious orientation towards a Cambodian audience and the touring of the production to provinces which had never seen theatre before are aspects of the production which justify its falling under the category of TfD. However, this is perhaps not the occasion to debate over terminology, which never is unproblematic – the point of interest to be emphasised here is the dynamics of the collaboration, the specific model of working that might raise cultural political issues relevant to collective memory in Cambodia.

The production and rehearsal process began in Phnom Penh in mid-January 2009, beginning with auditions for the roles that had not yet been cast, and the initial organisation of the province tour. Rehearsals with the four actresses – Morm Sokly, Kov Sotheary, Chhon Sina and Pok Sovanna – started on 19 January 2009 (Prins and Martens), giving a production period of about five to six weeks before the opening of the performance in Phnom Penh.

3.1.2 Performance Analysis

One of the immediately noticeable aspects of *Breaking the Silence* is the extreme simplicity of the mise-en-scène. The performance is very clearly oriented towards a fourth wall, with the set positions of the four actresses in a row across the stage, facing the audience – at any point in time when any of the actresses are not playing characters in a particular scene, they return to this predetermined position (see Figure 2). The other three performers on the stage are the dancer, Khiev Sovannarith, the singer, Yin Vutha, and the musician, Ieng Sakkona. All seven of the performers remain on stage throughout the performance – there are no offstage entrances and exits other than the initial entrance of the performers during the Prologue. The dancer, Khiev, moves around the stage throughout the performance, performing excerpts from different Khmer classical dance roles, most recognisably that of the Monkey. He does not wear traditional classical dance costumes, however, but is attired in a simple white outfit of a singlet and long loose-fitting pants. The singer, Yin, remains at the downstage left corner throughout the performance, and functions somewhat like a narrator or facilitator, allocating roles to the actresses at the start of each scene. Ieng, the musician, sits just behind Yin at stage left with the musical instruments that he plays in accompaniment to the performance.

Figure 2

Prins, Annemarie and Richt Martens. *Cambodia 2009.* Blogger.com, 4 Mar. 2009. Web. 1 Dec. 2009. <http://cambodia-amrita.blogspot.com/>.

As mentioned, the set can be described as minimalist, with little more than white drops hanging on three sides of the stage to form a "white box" into which the audience looks. A narrow elevated platform runs across the stage along the upstage wall or backdrop, on which performers walk or sit at points during the performance. Running across the surface of the platform facing the audience are green strips near the ground, representing grass. Finally, a woven rug covers the floor of the whole stage. Four low plastic stools, like those for common everyday use found in many households in Cambodia, are set on the stage for the actresses to sit on. The simplicity and overall whiteness of the mise-en-scène is striking, perhaps to evoke calmness and peace to balance the horror of the subject matter being dealt with on stage.

The play comprises seven scenes, a Prologue and an Epilogue. The scenes were written by Prins based on the personal stories collected during the research trip – criteria for choosing which stories should be used included representing a variety of contexts, the presence of an interesting conflict, and of characters with whom the audience could easily identify

(Prins and van Houte). In some cases several different personal stories were combined to form one scene in the play. The first scene immediately launches the play forward by presenting a very real and problematic scenario. It revolves around Mr. Akrak, a former Khmer Rouge soldier, and his interactions with three other characters. Mr. Akrak, questioned by the other characters who were victims of the regime, constantly denies responsibility, giving weak responses in his own defence such as "there's no evidence" and "you have no proof." The climax of the scene comes when another man, Mr. Preal, asks Mr. Akrak about the body of his father, whom Mr. Akrak apparently killed during the regime. Mr. Akrak quickly makes evasive excuses and then tries to leave. This scene is based on an interview that Prins and van Houte did with a former Khmer Rouge soldier, during which they experienced first hand the evasiveness with which former soldiers often react when faced with their past (Prins and van Houte).

The play then continues with six more scenes telling the rest of the stories in vignettes, each scene featuring a different situation and different characters, except for the last two scenes where one of the characters overlaps across the scenes. Worth describing further are two of the scenes which I find especially poignant. Firstly, Scene 2 portrays the true story of one of the actresses, Chhon Sina, who as a ten-year-old child witnessed the death of her father in a hospital, and the complicity of a young nurse who behaved rudely to her parents at the time and did nothing to help. Chhon tells her side of the story first, following which another actress takes on the persona of the nurse – now a woman of 48 years old – and also tells her

own story. From this scene the audience learns both the tragedy of Chhon's experience, and the helplessness of the nurse – ill-trained, severely lacking in food and medicine to give the patients, and fearing for her own life, the nurse relates, "I wanted to escape but that was impossible, I was trapped in this terrible situation." It is apt that the scene ends on an ambivalent note. The two women, faced with each other, are asked by a third persona if they are able to reconcile – the nurse, after initially making an excuse for herself, eventually makes a sincere apology, while Chhon simply expresses her inability to deal with the situation. It is an emotional moment, rendered even more heartbreaking by the knowledge that Chhon is portraying herself, and the lack of an easy conclusion illustrates the reality – that while reconciliation is a goal, it is of course far from straightforward, and is something that will require more time and patience to achieve.

The other scene, Scene 5, is a monologue by a 39-year-old woman relating a story from her childhood. A little girl at the time of the regime, she is overcome by hunger one night and steals rice from the family's precious reserves. The theft is discovered the next morning by her siblings, and although her mother knows who is responsible, she keeps it to herself. The little girl is guilt-stricken, but dares not confess to her mother. By the end of the regime most of her family has perished, while the girl survives. Now a doctor, she carries this guilt with her all the time and regrets not telling her mother while she was still alive. This monologue is simple and even performed in a slightly comic manner, when the actress, Morm Sokly, mimes the act of tiptoeing over her sleeping family members in the middle of the night and stealing the rice. However, this scene illustrates the power

of understatement in expressing extremely serious and complex emotions. When the woman speaks of the ever-present guilt in her otherwise comfortable life at present, the realisation of the gravity of the situation casts the previous actions in a different light. The audience is made to realise that the act of the little girl's, motivated by nothing more than sheer hunger, and which would be considered innocent and hardly a serious matter in almost any other context, carries such grave implications simply because of the incredibly dire circumstances that were the reality of life under the Khmer Rouge regime.

As Prins directly states, the play was staged with a Brechtian approach (Prins and van Houte). One way in which this is evident throughout the play is the focus not on a realistic representation of actions, but instead the use of symbolism to economically depict events without literally acting them out. For instance, in Scene 4, going to the market is represented by the actress simply walking in a circle to reach her destination, without the aid of set or props to concretely designate a market.

Each actress takes on multiple characters over the course of the play, and cross-gender casting is employed – the actresses play men as well as women. In line with this, it is clear in the manner of acting that the actresses are not meant to take on their characters according to the principles of realistic acting. In general, they show little emotion when speaking, and usually do not dramatise their speeches with actions or body movements. Direct audience address is employed often, such as when songs are sung by Yin or the actresses, and in the Prologue when the actresses face the audience and speak to them:

SOVANNA. So many stories.
We have to tell our stories.
SINA. We're telling our stories
out of a relentless urge.
SOKLY. How did it happen
that Khmer killed Khmer?
THEARY. You must try
to help us think this through.

A similar address takes place in the Epilogue. Even when the actresses are speaking as characters, much of their speech is directed at the audience in the form of monologues rather than exchanges between characters.

On the whole, the play can be described as text-driven, rather than action-based – much of what happens is related through speech rather than demonstrated through action. Like in *Beyond the Killing Fields*, the understatement allows the events portrayed in the play to speak for themselves, rather than literally dramatising the heavy subject matter. This means of representing the troubling events of the Khmer Rouge period seems to stem from the notion that realistically depicting events or actions on stage as they happened may shake the audience's emotions too strongly, striking a little too close to reality and bringing them face to face with their painful memories. However, as will be discussed in the following chapters, in the case of *Breaking the Silence* such an assumption may have been misplaced.

Juxtaposed with the heavy use of spoken textual elements are classical Khmer performance elements such as music and dance. As

previously mentioned, the musician, Ieng, is present on stage throughout the performance, performing music primarily to accompany songs, as background music during scene transitions, and as sound effects. The traditional musical instruments used include a metallophone, cymbals, drums, and a flute. The music was devised over the rehearsal process by Ieng in collaboration with Prins. The original aim was to use everyday objects such as metal tins and lids as instruments, but the idea was later discarded because of a concern that this would be too alienating for the village audience (Prins and Martens). The final decision was to use traditional music for the most part while employing a few everyday objects sparingly for sound effects. The use of traditional music and singing styles, such as in the Prologue where Morm sings a song entitled "The Cambodian People's Lament" accompanied by Ieng on the flute, is conceivably a means to appeal to audiences in the villages and those with a limited experience of *Lakhaon Niyeay* by using performance elements that will be familiar to them.

The inclusion of the male dancer, Khiev, who performs a combination of several dance roles, serves a similar purpose. Of particular interest is the Monkey role, which in Khmer classical dance is traditionally performed only by men (Phim and Thompson 36). This role is a comic one, and immediately recognisable to a Cambodian audience, appealing especially to children (Chhang). According to Chhang Youk, the Director of DC-Cam, "without the Monkey there'll be no interest for the kids" – Chhang sees the inclusion of this role as evidence of an attempt to appeal to a balanced target audience, adults and children alike. Ser Sayana, another

DC-Cam staff member, expresses a similar opinion – that the Monkey character helps to diffuse the tension and balance the seriousness of the subject matter. In addition, the Monkey sometimes takes on the role of the alter ego of one of the other characters. One of the most obvious instances is in Scene 5, where the Monkey becomes the alter ego of the little girl who steals the rice, and mirrors her actions, adding to the mild comic nature of the scene.

On the level of representing difficult memories on stage, the performance uses several devices to conjure up the atmosphere of the period in a very immediate way. For example, beyond the basic level of storytelling through the actresses' words, the declamatory style of audience address used by Yin in Scene 1 is reminiscent of the tone that would be used by Khmer Rouge soldiers exercising control over the rest of the population. He goes on to designate roles to the actresses in a tone that sounds almost accusatory, as if both issuing commands to the actresses to take on those roles and accusing them of some misdeed. This is intensified by the English version of the script, which reads, "You are Mrs. Sophy. You are 52 years old.. [sic] You want to hear the truth and nothing but the truth." The language here is clearly accusatory, which may or may not be the case in the Khmer translation. Nevertheless, Yin uses this hard commanding tone every time he designates the roles at the start of each scene, which conjures up the sense of being under fierce control, akin to the blaring of orders through loudhailers, easily associated with military coups.

Additionally, Scene 7 contains a segment where the actresses and Yin portray Khmer Rouge soldiers joyfully singing a song of the Angka

organisation[18] – the song used in the play is an actual revolutionary song sung during the period, and this is also one of the very few segments in the play in which the actresses perform in a realistic manner (Morm). This part of the play caused problems with the censors before the play opened in Phnom Penh, for reasons of the song being too stark a reminder of the period. On reflection, the doubts that the Cambodian censorship authority had with the song should not be considered surprising, given the immediacy with which such an aural stimulus evokes the atmosphere of the period. It is conceivable that aural devices, such as Yin's tone when he functions as narrator, and the Angka song in Scene 7, may stir up troubling memories for the audience in a very real and immediate way.

Finally, the structure of the play – stories told in vignettes, with limited reference to time or place, each story taking place in the general present – can be seen as a means to stage the idea that the characters and scenarios portrayed are not specific but could apply to anyone in the audience. Each audience member may identify with at least some stories or parts of each story. Furthermore, Wald observes that "theatre appears particularly suitable for the artistic representation of traumatisation," because staging devices such as the doubling of characters and the simultaneous staging of different spatiotemporal settings can effectively reproduce the experience of a victim (156-157). Although Wald's study mostly concerns the trauma of child sexual abuse, her observations above may still apply to a play such as *Breaking the Silence*, which uses precisely these devices. The classical dance role of the Monkey as the characters'

[18] "Angka", or "Angkar", was the name by which the Khmer Rouge party was known to Cambodians.

alter ego has been discussed. The spatiotemporal settings of the stories are often ambiguous, moving fluidly between past and present. For instance, in Scene 2, where Chhon relates her father's death, and Scene 5, where Morm enacts the little girl stealing rice, they each speak as if they were reliving those events in the present. Towards the end of the respective scenes, the time is brought back to the present and the characters speak as their present selves again. This can be seen as the staging of the experience of those who lived through the Khmer Rouge period – for them the troubling memories will perhaps never fade, and will remain in the perpetual present.

This chapter has introduced the production of *Breaking the Silence*, giving an idea of the picture of the Khmer Rouge regime as staged by the performance. The performance contributes to the collective memory of Cambodia in the sense that it concretises a version or versions of narratives surrounding the period, derived from the testimonies of people who personally experienced it, but also shaped by the sensibilities of the non-Cambodian director and other members of the production team. The narratives as dramatised by the performance are transmitted to the younger generation, further shaping their collective memory of the period. With this in mind, the following chapters examine *Breaking the Silence* more closely in relation to collective memory, questioning the impact and influence, if any, of the production on shaping the collective memory of Cambodia.

3.2 *Breaking the Silence* and the Negotiation of Cambodian Collective Memory

This chapter considers *Breaking the Silence* as part of Cambodia's collective memory. One of the primary purposes of the production was to "make something for the Cambodian people," as Prins and van Houte stress several times over the course of an interview. Given this explicit intention, the impact of the production on the collective memory of Cambodians, and the extent to which it can be considered a valuable part of Cambodia's collective memory, is a pertinent issue to examine. Recalling the discussion on Wertsch in Chapter 2.2, collective memory can be understood as mostly "textually-mediated," allowing for people who did not experience an event first-hand to nonetheless participate in the "memory" of it through any kind of medium – books, films, the internet, word-of-mouth, and so forth. Accepting this premise, *Breaking the Silence* would then be one such medium through which the younger generation of Cambodians, who were born after the Khmer Rouge regime, can gain more information about the period and contribute to the overall collective memory of it with their own thoughts and experiences.

As Schechner states, "at all levels theater includes mechanisms for transformation" (191). He also clearly distinguishes between "social drama" and "aesthetic drama," the former referring to events occurring in everyday, real life that share the characteristics of performance and can be analysed as such; the latter referring to performances in the more conventional sense, with a clear line drawn between performers and audience, taking place in a marked performance space such as a theatre. Crucially, "the function of aesthetic drama is *to do for the consciousness of*

the audience what social drama does for its participants: providing a place for, and means of, transformation" (193, Schechner's emphasis). As an "aesthetic drama," *Breaking the Silence* can be expected to carry this transformative aspect on the consciousness perhaps further than other examples of aesthetic drama such as, for the sake of argument, Shakespeare's plays. This is because *Breaking the Silence* portrays not fictional events, but events that happened in actuality, and that a large part of the audience would be able to identify with. Hence, the transformation that aesthetic drama affords for the audience under usual circumstances would conceivably be magnified in this case – the audience's reflection on the events would contribute directly to their collective memory, rather than in the case of watching Shakespeare, where reflection might occur, but may not translate into an impact on the audience's immediate lives to the same degree.

With the above in mind, I conducted several interviews in September and October 2009 with individuals who were involved in the production as performers or creative and production team members, as well as a group of audience members. These included Annemarie Prins and Nan van Houte in Amsterdam; and in Phnom Penh, the four actresses, assistant director and choreographer Chey Chankethya, and DC-Cam director Chhang Youk and team leader of student outreach and Cham oral history project Ser Sayana. The audience members that I interviewed were residents of Khum Tean village in Kandal Province, about an hour's drive away from Phnom Penh. They were led by Pich Kalyan, who had been one of the interviewees during the original research carried out by Prins and van

Houte for *Breaking the Silence*. Now the leader of a support group for women in the surrounding area, Pich was respectfully referred to as "Madam Kalyan" by those who knew her. Having experienced the brutality of the regime, contributed to the source material for the production, and had the production visit their village in March 2009, it was apt that I was now interviewing this group of audience members about the production and how it contributed to or affected their memories of the period.

Additionally, my visit to Phnom Penh fortunately coincided with a playwrighting workshop that New York-based playwright Catherine Filloux was conducting with two of the actresses, Morm Sokly and Chhon Sina. Prior to my Phnom Penh trip, I had been introduced to Filloux's extensive work about Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge regime, which includes plays performed in the United States, Cambodia and elsewhere, articles, and several workshops conducted in Cambodia with Cambodian practitioners and university students. My own research was thus able to benefit from encountering her in person in Phnom Penh.

This part of my research produced interesting findings, some of which resonated with existing preconceptions about the general attitude of Cambodians towards the Khmer Rouge period, but some of which seemed to overturn common assumptions about Cambodian collective memory and the part that *Breaking the Silence* might play in it. This chapter deals mainly with the findings from my interviews, detailing the role of *Breaking the Silence* in Cambodia's collective memory as can be understood from the particular group of people interviewed, all of whom came in contact with the production in one way or another.

The first problematic issue that arises when discussing collective memory about Cambodia is whose collective memory is actually being referred to. The perception that the attitude towards the Khmer Rouge regime is one of silence, as alluded to in the title of the play in question, is dubious, on a basic level because this assumes that few endeavours have been made to discuss or remember the period at all. Related to this is the question of whose responsibility the remembering of the period is considered to be. As mentioned earlier, the responsibility towards remembering the Holocaust had been predominantly left to the Jews during the 1980's, whereas that attitude later shifted towards a more international recognition of the importance of that remembering for all (Irwin-Zarecka 8). In the case of Cambodia the situation seems to have been the opposite, however. Writing about Filloux's play *Photographs from S-21,* Wendy Hesford comments that "the photographs [of Khmer Rouge prisoners], then, also position the audience as pedagogical subjects, prompted to contemplate our role in remembering Cambodia's traumatic past" (104). The trope of a general, international obligation towards remembering Cambodia's painful past is difficult to account for – one possible, optimistic, explanation could be an increasing global awareness of human rights issues, especially in light of the attention brought to the regime by the ongoing tribunal in Phnom Penh.[19] This international responsibility is also complicated by the involvement of various other international parties

[19] The Cambodian National Assembly passed the law to set up the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea in 2001, and in 2003 the nature of international participation in the trials was agreed with the United Nations (ECCC). The tribunals have been ongoing since, with "the first of a series of UN-backed trials [beginning] in February to hold five Khmer Rouge leaders accountable for crimes during their rule" (IRIN news service).

in the tumultuous politics paving the way for the Khmer Rouge victory in the decades preceding it.[20]

Regardless of the case, the resources available about the Khmer Rouge regime from foreign points of view, as documented by Osborne, cannot be described as a dearth. Performance practitioners such as Filloux have also produced a solid body of creative work dealing with the period and the persisting effects on survivors. For example, *Photographs from S-21* was written as a reflection on a controversial exhibition, in the New York Museum of Modern Art, of original photographs of prisoners from the notorious high-security Khmer Rouge prison S-21 in Phnom Penh. This play has been performed in Thailand, Denmark, the United States, India, the United Kingdom, and Cambodia (Hesford 104-105). *Eyes of the Heart*, another play by Filloux, deals with the psychosomatic blindness suffered by a victim and survivor of the regime, and was inspired by Filloux's encounters with Cambodian women who suffered from the condition, whom she met in refugee camps in the United States.[21] The play was first performed in English by the National Asian American Theatre Company in New York, and then in Khmer at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh as a final directing project (Filloux, "Eyes" 77). Other examples of theatrical pieces originating outside Cambodia dealing with the Khmer Rouge period include *Searching for Innocence: Phnom Penh*, a play also based on the stories of survivors, written by Thomas DeTitta, a playwright and director from the United States who engages in work

[20] Countries such as France, the United States, Vietnam and Thailand all had a part to play in the politics of the period. I refrain from delving further as this is a subject beyond the scope of this thesis, but more information can be found in Becker; and Vickery.
[21] This information was given me in a personal communication.

similar to Filloux's (DeTitta), and TheatreWorks' *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* discussed earlier.

In contrast, the collective memory textual base for Cambodians themselves is often understood to be comparatively narrow. The supposed silence amongst Cambodians surrounding the topic of the Khmer Rouge is linked to a reluctance of survivors to remember it – "it is a strange amnesia: a kind of anti-amnesia, I think to myself, because as much as some people want to erase the memory, it is there, perhaps even more strongly, because it is being resisted" (Filloux, "Thread" 6). This undercurrent of memory beneath the surface "amnesia" has been discussed in relation to McAuley's "feral memory syndrome" in Chapter 2.3 – the Sem family of Hamera's study clearly exemplify the persistence of the painful memories despite their attempts to resist or ignore them. The general suppression of discussion about the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia has been noted several times in this thesis and from different sources: the exclusion of the subject from the school syllabus (Filloux, "Thread II" 63; Prins and van Houte), the disbelief of children of their parents' accounts of the period (Filloux, "Thread" 6; Prins and van Houte), and the resulting non-communication across generations (Prins and van Houte) are commonly mentioned examples.

Referring to one of Filloux's plays, *Silence of God*, Pich Tum Kravel, the Cambodian playwright, remarks that "it creates a memory . . . for Khmer people who will see it, and remember their own experiences" (quoted in Filloux, "Thread" 6). The idea of "creating" a memory, articulated by a Cambodian who lived through the regime himself, is a

crucial one, as it implies exactly a gap or lapse in the collective memory of the period for Cambodians, for whom such works will help to reconstruct that memory. Hence, *Breaking the Silence* has been seen as a momentous effort in encouraging Cambodians to talk about the period, and in so doing "creating" another memory for Cambodians. As Prins writes in her director's message, "the main goal of this production is to find a way out of trauma's silence; contributing to open dialogue as part of the process of reconciliation." Prins and van Houte additionally comment during the interview, "no one has done this in Cambodia before;" furthermore, citing the proliferation of creative and artistic work following the end of World War II, their firm conviction of the effectiveness of performance for helping Cambodians to deal with the painful memories can be clearly seen. From these attitudes, it is apparent that the production is thought to be groundbreaking in its specific aim to address the "silence" that has characterised the collective memory of the period.

The opinions expressed by some of the other interviewees also supported a positive evaluation of the contribution of *Breaking the Silence* to the collective memory of Cambodians. For example, DC-Cam director Chhang Youk proved to be very optimistic about the play's influence on Cambodians and their healing process. Chhang compares the play to "restoring the soul of the community," after the destruction of that "soul" by the Khmer Rouge. He enthusiastically evaluates the production as "very effective" in terms of achieving its aforementioned goals, "because it's real, right here on the ground."

Chhang also highlights the universality of the Cambodian experience – almost every Cambodian family lost members to the brutality of the Khmer Rouge, and every Cambodian was, and still is, affected by the period in some way. Yet he acknowledges that the pain of survivors is of course very personal. Generalisation, in this case, stressing the universal nature of the experience for Cambodians, tends to negate, ignore or downplay individual suffering – a play like *Breaking the Silence* risks the danger of doing so because it frames the scenarios and characters as general ones that could be identified with by anyone in the audience. However, in Chhang's opinion the play manages to negotiate this problem, encouraging Cambodians to recognise their common past and heal as a group, while not denying the intensity of the personal pain. This is perhaps due to a wide enough range of scenarios being shown, and characters being given names to personalise them rather than remaining anonymous.

Breaking the Silence does seem to have played a significant role in stimulating discussion about the period, hence contributing to the collective memory of Cambodians – one example cited was the performance in Kampong Cham province, which drew an audience of approximately a thousand people, some of whom enthusiastically approached Prins after the performance to ask questions and talk about the play (Chhang). In terms of adding to the collective memory for the younger generation, the evaluation amongst the interviewees also seemed to be mostly positive. Ser Sayana, also from DC-Cam, comments that the play was certainly a good source of information for the younger generation about the period, especially because of the new way of presenting the information. Ser further explains that

touring *Lakhaon Niyeay* productions in the countryside are not new per se, having been in existence before the Khmer Rouge period, but had died out since. Additionally, the staging of stories about the period in the form of *Lakhaon Niyeay* is generally uncommon, so this tour to the provinces of a *Lakhaon Niyeay* production dealing with this particular subject matter would have been a novel and interesting phenomenon for the younger generation living in the provinces. Chey Chankethya, the young assistant director and choreographer of the production, relates how the stories included in the play helped her, as someone who had not experienced the regime, to understand the conflict from different points of view, such as that of the former Khmer Rouge soldier in Scene 1 or the nurse in Scene 2. This is especially valuable because in her experience, other sources about the period, such as books, usually tell only one side of the story – that of the civilian victims – whereas *Breaking the Silence* presents a balance of viewpoints and avoids accusing either side.

Chhang continues to be very passionate about extending the reach of the play, using it in other situations linked to his work at DC-Cam. The play is still performed about twice a month, sometimes in conjunction with the ongoing tribunal. He also uses sections of the play as role play material in schools, teacher training courses and so forth. Hence *Breaking the Silence* continues to increase its reach amongst Cambodians – the extent of which has surpassed that expected by Chhang himself at the start of the project.

The situation described up till this point would seem rather straightforward – in very simplified terms, a gap exists in the collective

memory regarding the Khmer Rouge period for Cambodians, who would rather deal with it by suppressing the painful memories. The performance of *Breaking the Silence* then opens up new ground by initiating conversation as a means of dealing with the memories. However, this overly-idealistic picture can certainly be contested. The interview with the villagers of Khum Tean gave a very different impression of the situation. Most remarkably, rather than demonstrating overwhelming silence regarding the subject of the Khmer Rouge regime, the villagers seemed all too eager to talk about their personal experiences during the regime (Pich et al). All through the interview, the conversation was constantly steered away from *Breaking the Silence* per se, towards the recounting of personal stories by one or another individual. Furthermore, the dominant qualm that the villagers held with the play was the understatement of the violence and horror of the period in the acting style – the villagers vocally expressed the opinion that they would much rather have had violence realistically dramatised on stage, instead of simply narrated in the deadpan style opted for by Prins. Contrary to the idea that a realistic portrayal of violence would be too painful to watch for those who actually experienced it during the regime, the villagers remarked that such realism would corroborate their experiences and was required in order for the younger generation to believe that such events really did take place.

Furthermore, as a dramatisation of part of the collective memory of Cambodia, the play seems to be disjunctive with the actual collective memory, at least of the section of the audience that I interviewed. The play exhorts reconciliation, as Prins stresses in her director's message, and as

sung repeatedly and emphatically in the Epilogue: “Transform the River of Blood into a River of Reconciliation.” However, it was clear from the villagers’ statements that reconciliation was not what they were concerned with. It was apparent, instead, that anger and hatred towards the Khmer Rouge still festered – indeed, one disturbing remark was that the only thing preventing them from exacting revenge, by killing the former Khmer Rouge soldiers who had done wrong to them and their families, was the law. It was the villagers’ opinion that if not for the current legal sanctions against murder, civil war would break out between the civillian victims of the regime and former soldiers. This highly disquieting idea reveals that the collective memory of at least some Cambodians certainly differs from the idealistic version that *Breaking the Silence* puts forth. Not only that, the angry, vengeful point of view runs much deeper than one production of *Breaking the Silence* can shake – it seems that the message of peace and reconciliation had all but been ignored by the village audience, who appreciated the play because of the attention it brought to their experiences, but not for its message of reconciliation.

While it was true that this was the first performance of any kind that had visited their village, and was therefore a novel experience for them, the overemphasis on the role of *Breaking the Silence* as, indeed, the first inducement to “break” their “silence” should certainly be rethought. As the interview progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the villagers were in fact used to talking about their experiences – they were even able to joke about the subject, such as when Pich suggested in jest that I myself would have been the first to perish had I been alive during the period.

While this mild surface humour certainly masks a pain that runs much deeper, it nevertheless indicates the achievement of a certain distance from the troubling experiences and represents the villagers' means of dealing with them. It might be fair to even suggest that they had perhaps talked about their experiences so much as to be jaded and frustrated at the evident futility of doing so. There seemed to be an underlying concern with being believed, as I was asked several times by the villagers if I believed their stories, a possible reflection of frustration that their own children often did not believe them. Hence, the primary assumption of *Breaking the Silence* – that there is silence in the first place – seems to have been misplaced. This "silence" often mentioned by the rest of the world even seems to be perhaps simply an excuse for inactivity on its part, for not being willing to listen to what Cambodians have and want to say. A short discussion with Toni Shapiro-Phim[22] confirmed this observation – in her experience meeting and working with Cambodians, it has never been the case that talking about the subject seemed taboo for Cambodians.

Indeed, the perpetuation of the misconception of silence surrounding the subject entails not giving Cambodians enough credit, and demonstrates the arrogance of discourses that perpetuate such a perception. The pool of collective memory resources for Cambodians themselves is clearly not less rich than that available from foreign points of view – such an assertion would certainly be ridiculous and extremely arrogant, given the immediate reality of the horror for the Cambodians who experienced the

[22] I was fortunate enough also to meet Shapiro-Phim, a dance ethnographer who works in the United States and Cambodia, and the author of *Dance in Cambodia*, to share a few ideas during my trip to Phnom Penh. The discussion did not constitute a formal interview, however.

regime on their own soil. The difference would perhaps simply be that the collective memory of Cambodians exists mostly in oral form, rather than being written or in the form of some other creative product, which forms the large majority of available foreign perspectives on the subject. Due to a tendency in Western cultures to privilege the written word over the spoken – in academic circles, literature, performance traditions, and so forth – the active and ongoing verbal transmission of ideas which contributes to the huge collective memory of Cambodians has largely been ignored. It is simply assumed that Cambodians remain "silent" on the subject, and hence the responsibility of encouraging the "breaking" of that silence has been graciously taken up by well-meaning, perhaps, but misinformed non-Cambodians.

The actresses Kov Sotheary and Pok Sovanna also revealed in their respective interviews that the extent to which the play influenced the collective memory of Cambodians can perhaps be said to be limited or at least questionable, taking into account its audience. Both felt that the play was suitable more for a highly-educated audience, and not so much for the audiences in the villages, which tended to be less highly-educated, or illiterate in some cases. This is an important observation, given that one of the specific goals of the production was to reach out to Cambodians living in villages as well as those in the cities. Kov and Pok both feel that the village audience tends to miss the point of the play's subtlety, not having the audience competence to fully appreciate such a play. On the other hand, they observe that the play also misses the point, as what the audience wants is realistic acting and a more literal portrayal of the violence, a point

already corroborated by the interview with the villagers of Khum Tean. Hence, because of this mismatch, the play may have operated on the level of a reminder of the period, but perhaps not so much in terms of changing their attitudes towards remembering it. Going back to Schechner's point about aesthetic drama, the extent of the transformative effect of the play on the audience's consciousness can perhaps be doubted – it seems rather that the audience's ideas and views concerning the Khmer Rouge period had always been as they were, and while *Breaking the Silence* may have indeed encouraged an increase in discussion, it would perhaps be going too far to say that their worldview had been extensively changed as a result of the play.

Having evaluated the possible impacts of *Breaking the Silence* on the collective memory of Cambodia, it will also be relevant to consider here the effect of the production on the memories, or attitudes towards remembering, of the actresses themselves, for whom the production was undoubtedly a very personal and emotional experience. As mentioned before, all four of the actresses had experienced the regime as young children, and all with the exception of Pok Sovanna had participated in an earlier production with Prins which dealt directly with their own childhood experiences of the regime. *Breaking the Silence*, with the incorporation of many more stories about the regime, extends the work of this first project by requiring each actress to take on multiple personas, and more specifically, both characters who were Khmer Rouge soldiers and those who were civilian victims. In considering the role of the production in the process of coming to terms with the troubling memories of the regime, it is

acknowledged that indubitably, no definite statement can ever be made about Cambodia as a whole – the value of such generalisations would be suspect in any case. Given the above conundrum, in projects of this nature, the experience of the participants themselves would perhaps provide some useful lessons to learn from as well.

In the interviews with the actresses of *Breaking the Silence*, Pok, Chhon and Morm indicated that being involved in the production had helped them to better come to terms with their own difficult histories. In all three cases, the actresses felt that going through the acting process had enabled them to talk about their experiences during the regime more freely. For example, Morm revealed that before her involvement with this production, she had felt comfortable talking about her experience only to very close relatives and friends, but this production has changed her attitude to enable her to share her story more publicly. As an actress, the opportunity to share with the community the stories portrayed in the play is a source of contentment. On top of her personal change in attitude, she also expresses the hope that the audience of the production will be inspired to do the same – to share their experiences more openly rather than try to forget. Similarly, for Chhon, the sadness caused by the death of her father can perhaps never be eliminated, but sharing her story on stage nevertheless helps her to "feel better." This independent testimony from the actresses can perhaps be seen to corroborate van Houte's opinion that "art is very important in traumatised societies" (Prins and van Houte).

However, the interview with the fourth actress, Kov, proved less optimistic. For Kov the pain seemed still to affect her greatly, her

experience with *Breaking the Silence* notwithstanding. Kov's interview will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.3, but as a preliminary observation, this is perhaps a warning against too much idealism. The usefulness of performance for dealing with troubling memories may indeed be substantial; however, that usefulness nevertheless has limits when scars run deep.

3.3 Cultural Politics and Ethical Issues

Having discussed *Breaking the Silence* in relation to collective memory in the previous chapter, this chapter broadens the discussion, looking at some of the issues that can be raised about the collaborative structure of *Breaking the Silence*. The particular set-up of the project, involving several different creative and funding organisations, and individuals contributing in various capacities, mostly from the Netherlands and Cambodia, undoubtedly provokes questions to do with the complexities inherent in such a collaboration across cultures. This chapter thus discusses the problematic aspects of *Breaking the Silence* from a cultural political point of view, as well as the ethics involved in such a project. The implications for the research that constituted part of this thesis itself will also be considered.

The importance of these issues lies in the observation that "questions of memory are often, if not always, bound up with questions about morality" (Bell 19). Given that collective memory tends to be relevant in relation to some conflict, injustice, or other situation where competing claims are at stake, it is not difficult to see why issues of cultural politics and ethics would immediately surface in any discussion of collective memory. Examples abound to illustrate this, and one need only consider World War II and the Holocaust; or the place of Native Americans in the American national consciousness, that of aborigines in the corresponding Australian context, and indeed any conflict or tension involving different ethnic groups, to see why constructions of collective memory immediately carry moral implications and judgements regarding

which party was right or wrong in the conflict. Although evaluating responsibility for the tragic consequences of the Khmer Rouge regime – which would require a whole separate thesis – is not the concern of this discussion, the cultural politics and ethical concerns raised by the production of *Breaking the Silence* nevertheless relate to the overall examination of Cambodian collective memory, especially in terms of how, and from what point of view, it is being constructed.

Starting with the views of Prins and van Houte, it is notable that although Prins is cautious about viewing the impact of *Breaking the Silence* with too much optimism, the general impression is nonetheless that the project was an entirely new undertaking of its kind in Cambodia. Such an assertion is problematic, because many of the interviews with the Cambodian cast and crew of the production revealed that neither the form of *Lakhaon Niyeay* nor the subject matter of the production was new in Cambodia (Chey; Chhang; Kov; Morm; Ser). *Lakhaon Niyeay*, as noted before, and confirmed independently by Chhang and Ser, was rather actively present in the 1950's and 1960's. However, the use of *Lakhaon Niyeay* after the Khmer Rouge regime to deal with that subject matter has not been common. Conversely, the treatment of the subject matter in performance is not entirely new either. Interviewees like Chey and Kov mention that performances dealing with the Khmer Rouge period have been staged in Cambodia before, but using traditional or classical performance forms, and perhaps on a smaller scale. Perhaps what was new or unusual about the production, then, was the specific combination of *Lakhaon Niyeay* and the subject matter of the Khmer Rouge period. Additionally,

Chhang and Ser both acknowledge the production's contribution to a resurgence in *Lakhaon Niyeay*, which can be seen as a positive development for the performance scene on the whole in Cambodia.

Hence, the contribution of *Breaking the Silence* to the larger situation of performance in Cambodia is undeniably acknowledged. Nevertheless, the above shows that overemphasis on the novelty or uniqueness of either *Lakhaon Niyeay* or the concept of using performance to deal with the troubling subject matter would be an oversimplification of matters, stemming from uninformed assumptions about Cambodia and its performance landscape.

The major concern with such a project would probably be how Western approaches to the portrayal of the difficult period might or might not work for Cambodian audiences. It is crucial to point out that the roles of playwright and director, assistant director, dramaturge, and set designer for the production – all roles at or near the top of the production hierarchy – were fulfilled by Dutch practitioners. It is thus reasonable to expect that many creative aspects of the production would be influenced by Dutch, or by extension, Western theatre convention.

As McGrane writes, "Chhang . . . dismissed the idea that a Western director might impose a Western understanding of trauma on the actors and audience." However, a closer examination of the play, taken together with the opinions of the interviewees, would indeed support that very idea. One of the aspects of the play that drew the biggest contention, as mentioned in Chapter 3.2, was the non-realistic and understated acting style. The villagers interviewed were emphatic about their desire to see more violence

depicted in the play, and in a more realistic manner. As also mentioned earlier, the actresses, especially Kov and Pok, recognised the same problem, indicating that the meaning behind the chosen restrained acting style was largely lost on the less educated segment of the audience. Morm explains the symbolic significance of the restraint in the acting – the directorial choice was made by Prins because restraint on stage would symbolise the restrictions to daily freedoms that were imposed on the general population during the regime. While it is not difficult to see how an audience used to Western theatrical conventions would be able to appreciate this symbolism, the Cambodian audience was clearly unable to relate to it, and its meaning was therefore lost.

It is of course possible to adopt Roland Barthes' position here, that the author's intention is irrelevant in any creative work – the reader or audience is free to make whatever they want out of it. However, in this case the villagers interviewed, while expressing general approval of the play, strongly felt that it did not depict the Khmer Rouge period as they knew it and would have liked it to be depicted. Hence, even allowing for the view that the meaning of any text lies at the receiving end, the fact remains that the village audience in this case found the production to be lacking in terms of addressing their expectations. As an expression of their collective memory, the villagers disagreed with it, because it did not convey their memory of the period as they would have wanted it to be transmitted to the younger generation.

Interestingly, in what would appear to contradict his statement in McGrane's article above, Chhang concedes during an interview that some

parts of the play were indeed "very Western." One example that he gives is the title of the play itself – *Breaking the Silence*, while suitably direct and meaningful in English, and corresponding with the play's purposes, would make little sense if translated literally into Khmer. Hence the title of the play has not been officially translated into Khmer at all; the play is known to the villagers simply as "Pol Pot Stories." Another disjunctive aspect of the play for Cambodians appeared to be the dominant colour of the mise-en-scène: white. The predominantly white set could perhaps have been chosen to give a sense of calm in concert with the theme of reconciliation, to balance the darkness of the period and symbolise the hope for a more peaceful future. This, however, did not make sense for the Cambodian audience, for whom the Khmer Rouge is unequivocally associated with the colour black. Hence a common question that Chhang reported encountering from the audience was why black did not feature more strongly in the play. While not intending to overly stress the well-worn dichotomy of East and West, these examples show how a difference between Western and Cambodian sensitivities does exist, and how the application of a Western understanding of the situation might appear disjunctive to a Cambodian audience.

Another common issue, notoriously difficult to negotiate in collaborations of this nature, is that of finance. The financial contribution to the project that came with the involvement of foreign groups was brought up in more than one interview. Both Kov and Morm acknowledged that without the support of the foreign groups in this specific production, there would have been no possibility of bringing the production on tour to the

provinces; and that more generally, the scarcity of funding is a big problem facing theatre in Cambodia. Dutch organisation Theatre Embassy, the main point of contact linking the production of *Breaking the Silence* with both creative expertise and funding organisations, is no stranger to the problematic and sensitive issues that can arise surrounding the financial arrangements within such cross-cultural projects where a large proportion of the funding comes from one side. The experience of Theatre Embassy with its numerous past projects has shown that the stark contrast between the financial abilities of the local community and the foreign participants is often glaringly obvious, and a mindset tends to remain where the party providing the funding is accordingly associated with power (Danse and Chng). This negatively influences the working relationships within the project, as financial ability then translates to cultural superiority as well. It is not the intention to insinuate that an extreme imbalance existed in the working relations in the case of *Breaking the Silence*. However, the fact that financial support as a part of the project that would not have been possible without foreign involvement was mentioned independently on two occasions should be cause for reflection, and may perhaps additionally account for the dominance of Western-influenced aspects of the production.

James Thompson, writing about his experience with applied theatre in conflict-torn Sri Lanka, mentions a caveat in the opening chapter about the dark links between current cross-cultural theatre practice and colonialism: “Arriving with the ‘gift’ of a performance – whether music or theatre – has a complex history in Batticaloa that contemporary encounters cannot easily shrug off” (*Digging* 10). He further observes that

"introducing cultural practices – even when labelled *theatre for development, applied theatre* or *social theatre* – is rarely done on the basis of equal exchange" (Thompson's emphasis). Clearly Thompson's remarks have implications for the case of Cambodia, as a former French Protectorate. The practitioners from the Netherlands in this case were essentially bringing "the 'gift' of performance," especially considering the view of Prins and van Houte that it was "expertise" being contributed to Cambodia; the "teaching" of new methods of performance. While it might be argued that the methods used by Prins were indeed unfamiliar to Cambodian performance, the language used to describe the participation of the collaborators from the Netherlands is problematic, as words like "expertise" and "teaching" imply that one party possesses knowledge that the other somehow lacks. As Thompson makes clear, "I am not saying that my practice is no better than that of Dutch colonials, but I do believe we have to work doubly hard to break that link" (*Digging* 10) – this is also true in the case of *Breaking the Silence*, where the implication that the practice of one party is lacking in some way compared to another could be seen as a manifestation of more intrinsic colonialist thinking.

As Filloux also recognises,[23] the issues of unequal exchange and colonialist overtones in such collaborations are very complicated ones, not necessarily conundrums for which there may exist straightforward answers at all. Perhaps an awareness of the situation on the part of practitioners may be the best starting point. The strategy that Filloux has adopted is to involve herself in projects that will foster creative capital in Cambodia, such as the

[23] Personal communication.

recent playwrighting workshop conducted with Morm and Chhon – the aim is to enhance the playwrighting skills of the actresses, on whom the responsibility for the development of the Cambodian theatre scene should ultimately rest.

In light of the possible angles from which the collaborative structure of *Breaking the Silence* could be questioned, some of which have been described above, the interviews with the Cambodian cast and crew seem to offer support for a relatively balanced collaboration, the inevitable colonialist significance notwithstanding. The working process was evaluated to be fair on the whole, with both sides genuinely and respectfully endeavouring to understand each other (Chey; Kov; Pok). While the acting style and mise-en-scène reflected Western theatrical conventions, the research that provided the raw material for the basis of the play was conducted amongst survivors of the regime, and the stories themselves could certainly be related to by the Cambodian audience.

Chhang and Chey both expressed the view that the collaboration of a foreign writer enabled a more balanced point of view and more openness in the portrayal of the stories. Both indicated that Cambodian portrayals of the Khmer Rouge regime tend to depict events from only one point of view – that of the civilian victims. The fact that Prins was an outside observer whom the regime did not personally affect enabled her to view the situation from a more objective perspective, hence the inclusion of stories from the point of view of former Khmer Rouge soldiers. Chey stresses the importance of this balance in viewpoints. As a member of the younger generation born after the regime, she feels that rather than assigning blame

to any one side, understanding the difficulties facing everyone during the regime regardless of which side they were on is crucial in the reconciliation process.

Another concern would be the issue of translation – none of the Dutch collaborators on the project speak Khmer, whereas the performers speak very limited English. The interviews conducted by Prins during the initial research were done in Khmer, then translated to English; based on these translated interviews the play was written, in English, and then translated into Khmer for performance. During the performances the English text was projected as surtitles on a screen above the stage. With translation often come many opportunities for meanings to be distorted, not necessarily due to inadequacies in the translation itself but simply because the nuances of each language may be difficult to express in any other, and it is arguable that meaning is always changed slightly, in however small a way, when translating from one language to another. Bearing this in mind, the fact that the process from research interviews to final performance involved translating from Khmer to English and then back again, implies room for significant changes in meaning of the text at all stages of the process. While the need for translation in this case is inevitable, the possibility of the effects of translation leading to the domination of a certain viewpoint should not be discounted.

Despite this concern, however, Chey relates that care was taken in the translation, at least of the text of the play from English to Khmer, translating ideas rather than word-for-word. Additionally, where doubt existed, the opinions of several individuals fluent in both Khmer and

English were consulted. Chhang goes so far as to indicate that many audience members could not believe that the play had been originally written in English, so well had it been translated that the expressions sounded like they could have been written directly in Khmer. Hence, the evaluation of participants involved in the project shows that possible concerns about translation seem not to have been a problematic issue in this case.

Finally, the performance form chosen – *Lakhaon Niyeay* – might also raise questions about the colonial implications that the form brings with it, as discussed in Chapter 2.1. In light of such colonial and elitist associations, the issue arises as to whether *Lakhaon Niyeay* would be the appropriate performance form to employ in an undertaking meant to appeal to and as a form of support for Cambodians. To offer a balance to that concern, it may be suggested that *Lakhaon Niyeay* has, since its appearance in the early twentieth century, taken its own direction as a Cambodian form, developing beyond its roots as essentially imported Western theatre. It is worth noting that even in the 1960's it was recognised that an undiscriminating application of Western dramatic techniques would be disjunctive in Cambodia. As Hang Thun Hak, the first dean of the Department of Dramatic and Choreographic Arts at the Royal University of Fine Arts, writes in French in an article in 1965:

> Le grand danger reste toutefois dans une imitation servile des écoles étrangères qui risquerait d'introduire des éléments artificiels à l'intérieur du contexte dramatique khmer. ("D'introduction" 81)

> The main danger rests, however, in a slavish imitation of foreign schools, which would risk introducing artificial elements into the Khmer dramatic context.

The harmful effects of the imposition of Western theatre in some postcolonial contexts have been noted, as in L. Dale Byam writing about African Theatre for Development. According to Byam, in the context of colonial Africa, Western theatre was simply another oppressive means of exercising control, with African performance forms being dismissed as undeveloped and having to adopt the characteristics of Western performance in order to gain credibility (5-6). It would appear, however, that the Cambodian context has unfolded somewhat differently. Not only have traditional and classical Khmer performance forms never really been threatened by *Lakhaon Niyeay*, they remain the more readily supported forms today. *Lakhaon Niyeay*, meanwhile, can be said to have become a Cambodian reappropriation, with groups in the 1950's and 1960's performing plays written by local playwrights, incorporating elements of traditional performance, and touring to villages (Daravuth and Muan 70-71; Ser). Therefore, the use of *Lakhaon Niyeay* in *Breaking the Silence* should perhaps be viewed separately from a postcolonial context, and seen rather as a contributing effort to the development of Cambodian performance as a whole.

Turning the discussion now towards ethical considerations, it will be opportune to again bring in the work of Thompson in Sri Lanka, from which important points can be drawn that may be easily seen to apply to a project like *Breaking the Silence*. It is acknowledged that Thompson's

suggestions and observations pertain to his experiences in Sri Lanka, and that each case is necessarily unique. However, a particular chapter in his book "asks what happens when one group of people (be they theatre makers, psychologists or researchers) asks another group to tell" (*Digging* 25) – a parallel can clearly be drawn with the *Breaking the Silence* process which explicitly encourages Cambodians "to tell" their stories.

One important and highly applicable point that Thompson makes is that "twenty years of civil conflict [in Sri Lanka] was not a situation that created an easy binary in the community between those watching and those participating" (*Digging* 35). While the specific dynamics of the respective conflicts differ, in the case of Cambodia the Khmer Rouge regime similarly affected all Cambodians. No one remained unaffected, able to "observe" the violence going on around them without being personally implicated in some way; hence all personal stories about the regime should not be taken lightly. Thompson also explains that the telling of stories within a community affected by conflict is especially precarious to manage because stories are the precise means by which conflicts are maintained on all sides. Hence, "without extreme care theatre projects that dig up narratives, experiences and remembrances can blame, enact revenge and foster animosity as much as they develop dialogue, respect or comfort" (*Digging* 25-26). As one such project, *Breaking the Silence*, by "digging up" personal stories in the first instance during the research interviews, and then putting them on stage, may have risked the danger of splitting the community even further apart instead of encouraging reconciliation, had the stories portrayed privileged a certain view or belief over others.

In Thompson's experience with the participants of a workshop in Sri Lanka, the storytelling made "an open debate about the effect of war . . . possible as long as no individual stories were told" (*Digging* 36). In such contexts each individual often has in their mind ideas of who is to blame, and the privileging of certain individual stories over others would be tantamount to assigning blame to certain parties over others. In this respect *Breaking the Silence* has had to tread carefully to "[avoid] the competing narratives of blame" (Thompson, *Digging* 36) embedded in stories about the period. Given that for practical reasons a limited number of personal stories could be included in the play, the risk of including certain points of view at the expense of others is a very real one. The play seems on the whole, however, evaluated to be balanced in its point of view, the most commonly cited examples being Scene 2, where the points of view of the little girl and the nurse are both given, and Scene 7, where two former Khmer Rouge soldiers reveal their past deeds and the current repercussions of those deeds (Chey; Chhang; Pich et al).

It is also possible to suggest that *Breaking the Silence* and its associated process – especially the research interviews conducted prior to writing the play – has allowed for positive discussion to take place within the communities coming into contact with the project. As Prins and van Houte relate, their interviews with individuals often attracted other family members and neighbours, who inadvertently joined in such that the interviews sometimes became group discussions instead. What Prins and van Houte found from this experience was that often the presence of foreigners was a tension-diffusing factor, such that the members of the

community actually found it easier to disagree and debate with each other under such circumstances. It is thus encouraging to surmise that a consequence of the interviews conducted by Prins and van Houte as part of the *Breaking the Silence* project was increased communication and debate amongst the community, that may otherwise not have happened.

As an extension of the ethical considerations surrounding *Breaking the Silence*, it will also be relevant to question the ethical implications of the research conducted for this thesis. If *Breaking the Silence* exemplifies some of Thompson's concerns regarding the "digging up" of stories in the context of a theatrical production and its research and preparation process, the interviews conducted as part of the research for this thesis, by in turn "digging up" stories about *Breaking the Silence*, also come under scrutiny for the risk of perhaps unnecessarily stirring up painful memories and emotions. Over the course of my interviews in Phnom Penh, the most uncomfortable encounter occurred with Kov, for whom some of my questions evidently provoked emotions that were still very near the surface. As Hamera "suspect[s] [her] instruments . . . both theoretical and interpersonal" (140), this encounter caused me to do the same, and to question if prodding at the difficult memories of others in the name of research was appropriate. Thompson remarks that "some stories are safer buried – respected and left undug" (*Digging* ix). Kov's discomfort made me wonder if I had perhaps strayed into territories better left untouched.

Yet Kov, as well as Pok, indicated that painful though their memories of the period may be, they would be willing to share them with me, but in a less formal setting – the framing of an interview had set up a

barrier between us, and was perhaps intimidating to the interviewees. This recalls another of Thompson's observations, that "tak[ing] out a notebook . . . immediately changed the relationship between those to whom [he] was talking and [him]self" (*Digging* 11). It seemed that I was experiencing precisely what Thompson describes. Furthermore, not having been involved in the production of *Breaking the Silence*, it would not be entirely surprising should the interviewees have seen my sudden appearance and research as somewhat suspect. That the perceived formality of the situation and the conceivably questionable circumstances of my presence may have influenced the responses of the interviewees is certainly a limitation of this research that I acknowledge.

The problematic interview framing, and the issue of Kov's unease, are not difficulties that I can purport to have solutions to. Hamera recognises also that, inevitably, "the ease and stability of scholarly claims" are shaken by such limitations in research (140) – while this should not be seen as reason to halt research activities altogether, perhaps recognising and acknowledging the problems inherent in delving into such sensitive situations is the least that can be done.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Having in Chapter 3 discussed *Breaking the Silence*, its place within the collective memory of Cambodia, and the cultural political and ethical issues raised by the collaborative structure of the project, it will now be timely to elucidate the links between all of the above and the theoretical and background discussions in the earlier chapters. This concluding chapter organises and restates the central points made in the thesis, as well as offers some additional remarks on the major issues relevant to the study, making reference to all three case studies discussed.

The conclusions of this study can be organised around three main ideas or issues: the part that *Breaking the Silence* plays in the collective memory of and the development of the theatre scene in Cambodia; the complex nature of the conflict and the resulting implications for collective memory in Cambodia; and the use of performance in general – as opposed to the particular case of *Breaking the Silence* – to deal with collective memory in Cambodia. These conclusions will be elaborated upon below.

In relation to the first main issue, I have noted that the impression received from some of the interviews that I conducted, such as those with Prins and van Houte, and Chhang, is that *Breaking the Silence* has been instrumental in filling a gap in the collective memory of Cambodians regarding the Khmer Rouge regime. The lack of written sources by and for Cambodians themselves dealing with the subject seems to be perceived as a manifestation of that gap in collective memory. Furthermore, the same gap in collective memory would appear to be logical following psychological and sociological explanations for an observed twenty-five-year lapse

between a catastrophic event and efforts to commemorate it, as detailed in Chapter 2.2.2. As the discussion in Chapter 3.2 has made clear, however, the "gap" in this case seems to have been deceptive, or perhaps in other words, there appears not to have been a gap at all. My interview with the residents of Khum Tean village, some of whom were interviewees for the original research interviews that Prins and van Houte conducted, and who were also audience members for *Breaking the Silence*, revealed that talking about the period amongst themselves and to the younger generation has probably always contributed to the collective memory of Cambodia. The apparent recent upsurge in efforts to commemorate the period, manifested in concrete products such as plays and films, may indeed reflect the time taken after the regime fell for sufficient resources to be amassed for their production. However, collective memory is not based on such concrete productions alone – word of mouth discussions at the village level very much constitute collective memory as well, and it is this segment of collective memory that has largely been ignored in considerations of Cambodian collective memory. Hence, the role of *Breaking the Silence* in filling a gap in the collective memory of Cambodians has probably been overstated.

The other main contribution of the production, especially from an imperialist or Euro-centric viewpoint, is to the development of the performance scene in Cambodia. *Breaking the Silence*, with the collaboration of the foreign creative team members and the employment of a recognisably Western performance framework, can be said to be a novel development in the Cambodian theatre scene, a new example from which

future Cambodian productions can draw inspiration. On the other hand, as the discussion in Chapter 3.3 has pointed out, the novelty of *Breaking the Silence* as a performance should also be put in perspective – neither the form of *Lakhaon Niyeay*, which *Breaking the Silence* takes, nor the use of performance to deal with the subject matter of the Khmer Rouge regime, can be considered new in Cambodia. The overstatements of the achievements of this one particular project, *Breaking the Silence*, are probably more a reflection of Euro-centric biases than the picture of collective memory in Cambodia.

The second main issue arising from the prior discussions is the highly complicated nature of the conflict, and closely related to that, the difficulty in promoting a collective memory of the period from an official standpoint. As mentioned with regard to Irwin-Zarecka's arguments in the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2.2, the existence of multiple points of view and thus myriad versions of stories makes the official promotion of remembrance very sensitive. This is because constructing an "official" version of the narrative would mean sanctioning one version over other competing narratives. In the case of the Khmer Rouge regime, the divide between victims and perpetrators – former Khmer Rouge soldiers or cadres – is similarly not as straightforward as it might seem. In Kiernan's description of the evacuation of Phnom Penh, it is clear that the Khmer Rouge itself was divided into several factions, each receiving different orders, and sometimes even openly and violently conflicting with one another (31-44). The ongoing tribunal is also embroiled in complications surrounding decisions about which former lower-level Khmer Rouge

cadres should be arrested, as opinions vary on the culpability of those further down the chain of command and the consequences for opening up the possibility of arrest for them (Corey-Boulet and Titthara). The limitation of *Breaking the Silence*, therefore, is that it presents the situation as if there were two clear sides of the divide – civilian victims and Khmer Rouge soldiers – whereas the factions involved were more numerous and complicated than that represented.

"As Roger Simon puts it, 'formations of memory carry implicit and/or explicit assumptions about what is to be remembered, how, by whom, for whom, and with what potential effects' (2)" (quoted in Hesford 106). Hesford argues that remembrance is basically "pedagogical" – this is particularly resonant with the case of Cambodia, in light of the recent efforts of the DC-Cam to promote the teaching of the history of the period in schools. However, as the quote above makes plain, any articulation of the memory of the period to be taught in schools necessitates the propagation of a certain point of view, which may possibly upset those who do not agree with it. This recalls also McAuley's ideas, discussed in Chapter 2.3, about official narratives ignoring other competing narratives that may not be officially sanctioned but nevertheless exist in a perhaps even more pervasive way. Pertinent to Cambodia, the point to emphasise is the difficulty in promoting or sanctioning one particular version of a memory that is meant to be collective. Perhaps this could offer an added explanation as to why collective memory in Cambodia has largely been transmitted through oral means thus far, with attempts to deal with the

memory from an official viewpoint only starting to be negotiated more recently.

The third, and perhaps most central, concern of this thesis has been the use of performance to deal with collective memory in Cambodia, which has been shown to be an endeavour fraught with ambivalence. The use of performance to deal with the extremely complex history and troubling memories of the Khmer Rouge regime has been, depending on the perspective and parties involved, a delicate undertaking at best, and at worst, revealing of some of the unpleasant cultural politics currently in operation between Cambodia and its Western collaborators.

A rather apparent observation that can be made from the various case studies in this thesis is that performance operates differently for different individuals involved in it, and may or may not offer solace from the painful memories of the regime. As evidenced by Hamera's study, using one's knowledge of a performance form as a justification for survival and to ease feelings of survivor guilt may result in even greater frustration and hopelessness. TheatreWorks' *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* presents an alternative scenario – for the Khmer classical dancer around whom the performance revolves, Em Theay, her art is a source of comfort and a means of helping her to come to terms with the memories of the regime. Moreover, she sees the production of *Beyond the Killing Fields* as a therapeutic opportunity to share her story with the world; hence, *Beyond the Killing Fields,* as an example of performance, also proves to be a means of dealing with the memories of the regime. The contrasting experiences, of Ben and May Sem in Hamera's study and Em Theay, with

Khmer classical dance, can likely be explained as a result of their differing levels of training and ability. The Sems' feelings of inadequacy stem from their recognition of their own limits in the practice of the dance form, whereas for Em Theay, the use of performance to explain her survival proves much more meaningful precisely because of her talent and success in performing and teaching the younger generation.

In the case of the actresses involved in *Breaking the Silence*, performance has also been revealed to be of differing usefulness for dealing with their difficult memories. While three of the actresses, Chhon, Morm and Pok, affirmed that being involved in the production of *Breaking the Silence* had indeed encouraged them to share their memories of the regime more openly, thus helping with the healing process, in Kov's case the situation was clearly less optimistic. As all four are prominent actresses as well as teachers at the Royal University of Fine Arts, technical limits would not seem a relevant justification for their differing experiences with performance in relation to their memories of the regime.

Although I have unfortunately not been able to explore the above issue further in this thesis due to my limited contact with the actresses, I would nevertheless like to offer some reflections on the subject. Kov, for whom the memories of the regime were clearly still painfully raw, and who expressed extreme frustration with the incomprehensibility of that part of her country's history, regardless acknowledged the experience of participating in *Breaking the Silence* in a positive light. Additionally, the actress commented, on her relationship with performance in general, that acting certainly exerts a positive influence in her life, making her feel

"proud" and "special." It would therefore be reasonable to suggest that performance, in however subtle a way, is indeed beneficial in helping people to come to terms with troubling memories, at least in most cases. It is of course overly idealistic to expect complete healing, but the power of performance to aid in that healing process should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, having in this thesis raised several reservations with the ethical implications of creating performance out of the painful memories of individuals, or performance that addresses such memories, it would also be pertinent to comment upon the appropriateness of doing so. Given the very real possibility of exacerbating the pain of those who have had difficult experiences by depicting their experiences on stage, one solution would be simply to not do so at all. However, such a solution would, in my opinion, be an easy way out, ignoring the valuable benefits of such performance for the sake of not having to also deal with its difficulties. The case of *Breaking the Silence* has shown that interpreting memories of the Khmer Rouge regime on stage has been a therapeutic experience for the performers involved, and has indeed increased awareness and discussion among the audience. TheatreWorks' *Beyond the Killing Fields*, whatever criticisms it may justify, also presents the continuing negotiation of the troubling memories as beneficial for the dancer Em Theay and her daughters. One crucial factor that tips the sensitive balance between cathartic and unethical practice is probably the agreement of those whose memories are being represented on stage – using sensitive material on stage, for example information gathered through interviews with survivors of harrowing experiences, without their express consent, would clearly

constitute an ethical violation. In the cases of both *Breaking the Silence* and *Beyond the Killing Fields*, however, there is at least no strong reason to suspect that the performers were participating against their will, and in the case of *Breaking the Silence*, the memories depicted, such as Chhon's childhood story, had been collected for the specific purpose of creating a play – Chhon herself expresses her approval of sharing her story with the audience. Hence, using performance to address difficult memories on stage, although a precarious undertaking, can still achieve beneficial results if approached responsibly.

With regard to using performance to deal with collective memory on the level of the audience, a whole other issue is opened up – that of the interference of cultural politics in the process. As Hesford points out, narratives associated with cultural or national identity often risk "cast[ing] certain groups as victims and others as saviours" (105). This is especially applicable to performances dealing with the regime performed outside of Cambodia, to international audiences. Discussing the play by Filloux, Hesford writes, "given the endurance of colonial discourses, which survived the formal end of colonial rule, and their function as rhetorical commonplaces in US culture, one of the greatest challenges of dramatic works such as *Photographs from S-21* is to enable audiences to question the hold that such commonplaces have on US audiences" (105). Although the discussion focuses on the United States and concerns the particular example of Filloux's play, Hesford's observation can be applied to other plays and performances with the Khmer Rouge regime as their subject matter as well. The concern is with the danger of representing Cambodia

and Cambodians as "victims" in need of assistance, be it from the United States, another particular country, or the international community in general. This danger certainly applies to TheatreWorks' *Beyond the Killing Fields*, as a play geared towards the international community.

Furthermore, Hesford goes on to comment, regarding *Photographs from S-21*, that "the play also draws attention to cultural practices and the politics of remembrance for international audiences, and the risk of converting evidence of human suffering and cruelty, in this case the Cambodian genocide, into cultural currency" (106). Again, the risk mentioned above can be applied to *Beyond the Killing Fields* – as discussed in Chapter 2.3, a possible reservation with the production concerns the use of Cambodian cultural forms in a performance clearly oriented towards an international audience. Both *Beyond the Killing Fields* and Hamera's study of the Sem family, while presenting opposing evaluations of how performance can be used to deal with collective memory, nevertheless fall into the trap of presenting Cambodian performance in a somewhat exoticised manner. The picture painted of Cambodian collective memory seems to be one inexorably associated with the loss of the great civilisation that produced the highly respected form of Khmer classical dance, and the current striving to reclaim that lost identity by attempting to restore the dance form to its former glory.

With *Breaking the Silence* concerns about exoticism may be less of an issue, as the play is, after all, explicitly created for a Cambodian audience. However, in light of the target audience of the play, then, the strong presence of foreign elements also raises questions. As the discussion

in Chapter 3.3 reveals, Western-influenced staging elements, such as the Brechtian acting style and the predominantly white set, rendered the play less relevant for the Cambodian audience than it would have been had those elements conformed more to their expectations.

The different performances discussed or mentioned in this thesis also reveal the complexity involved in making generalisations about performances addressing the Khmer Rouge regime, and collective memory, not least because of the different audiences that the performances were staged for. Some, like *Beyond the Killing Fields* and *Photographs from S-21*, staged mostly outside of Cambodia, arguably do not address Cambodian collective memory at all, but rather the conscience, or perhaps cultural credibility, of the international community, depending on how one chooses to see it. Alternatively, it can also be argued that the staging of those productions in Cambodia, albeit briefly, as well as the involvement of Cambodian performers, contribute to the collective memory of Cambodia at least for the limited number of Cambodians who came into contact with the respective productions, and that of non-Cambodians genuinely interested in Cambodian culture and history. *Breaking the Silence* perhaps stands out, then, as a performance that undeniably addresses Cambodian collective memory, even if the idea of Dutch practitioners coming into Cambodia to help construct Cambodian collective memory necessarily raises concerns.

The corresponding implication that Cambodians require help at all with constructing their own collective memory is extremely problematic, as is the idea that Cambodia's collective memory might seem to be shaped

more by what others think than the experiences and opinions of Cambodians themselves. Nevertheless, two responses can be offered to the above conundrum. Firstly, foreign points of view can conceivably bring more balance, compared to a fully Cambodian engagement with collective memory. In the case of *Breaking the Silence*, some of my interviewees attributed the achievement of a relatively balanced point of view, and the avoidance of assigning blame, to the involvement of a non-Cambodian playwright and director. It is admittedly disturbing that the villagers of Khum Tean whom I interviewed expressed such a strong desire for violent revenge, and although this desire is perhaps only to be expected, it would be unnerving to imagine a performance exhorting the community to take up revenge. Another beneficial aspect of foreign collaboration is the opportunity for exchange. With *Beyond the Killing Fields*, the presence and involvement of a Singaporean performer, who is shown learning Khmer classical dance and being corrected by Em Theay, can be seen to project a genuine appreciation of the dance form and an interaction between different theatrical forms. As with all intercultural practice this is not without its problems, but in an ideal situation such interaction with external performance forms could bring even more inspiration into the Cambodian performance context.

Secondly, despite the possible reservations with the collaborative structure of *Breaking the Silence*, the interviews that I conducted with the cast, crew and audience seem to indicate that the collective memory of Cambodians has always persisted, foreign points of view notwithstanding. In their attempts to rationalise the horror of the regime, writers such as

Becker (67; 189-192); and Vickery (8-9) have offered the unique, deeply-ingrained cultural and philosophical worldview of the Cambodian psyche as a possible explanation for why such an ideologically extreme and violent regime could have taken hold in the first place. Given this deeply-ingrained worldview, within which, both writers suggest, violence plays a significant role, it is not surprising that the collective memory of Cambodians, encompassing not just the events of recent history, remains strong and unique regardless of foreign attempts to aid in its construction and promotion. That the villagers of Khum Tean revealed their deeply-rooted anger and desire for revenge perhaps corroborates the above. Hence, with the case of *Breaking the Silence*, the apparent increase in awareness and discussion brought about can indeed be considered laudable, but its impact on changing the collective memory of Cambodians would probably be negligible.

In this thesis, I have highlighted several reservations with using performance to deal with collective memory, and suggested the impact of *Breaking the Silence* on the Cambodian collective memory to be positive in terms of encouraging discussion, but perhaps limited in terms of changing attitudes. However, as psychological theories would predict, the Cambodian process of remembering the Khmer Rouge regime is still in its early stages, and much more remains to be seen. With the second run and radio play version of *Breaking the Silence* to be produced, the ongoing tribunals, and vigorous efforts to promote the topic in education, the memory landscape of Cambodia is changing and will continue to change – demonstrating precisely the process of collective memory in action. The

performance scene in Cambodia also continues to develop, and perhaps, with time, the efforts of practitioners might prove able to move towards what *Breaking the Silence* fervently exhorts all Cambodians to do: "Transform the River of Blood into a River of Reconciliation. A River of Responsibility."

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