



Film director and writer Rithy Panh, inset below left; and scenes from *A Requiem for Cambodia: Bangsokol*, which will have its world premiere at Melbourne Festival.

BANGSOKOL PICTURES: TEY TAT KENG

In 1979, aged 15, the young Rithy escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand, later relocating to Provence, France, where his brother lived. While in Paris to study carpentry, he was handed a video camera during a party, kick-starting a fascination for the moving image; he graduated from the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies a few years later.

As he writes in *The Elimination*, his acclaimed 2012 autobiography (co-authored with Christophe Bataille), for a long while Panh wouldn't — couldn't — talk about what he had been through. He refused to speak Khmer, his native language. He rejected all links to Cambodia. He has previously quoted the Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi, who, haunted by his experiences in Auschwitz, wrote of the deep feelings of shame and guilt often experienced by survivors of death camps: "You feel others have died in your place, that we're alive because of a privilege we haven't deserved, because of an injustice done to the dead."

Time provided the necessary distance, as it does for so many victims of genocide: "Levi's memoir [*If This is a Man*] was only read by 1500 people when it was published [in 1947]. Nobody wanted to talk about why. But you know, when I am made to eat roots and insects like an animal, when my dignity is stripped from me, I cannot

feel like a human being. I have to learn how to live again." He shrugs. "Cambodians didn't want to see my early films. They wrote letters asking me to stop. Maybe they were ashamed, or the pain was too great. Then slowly parents and children came to see my films and they started to talk. Sometimes they cry. They tell me they are grateful, which makes me happy."

Panh's 1989 debut, *Site 2*, about a family of Cambodian refugees in a Thai camp in the 1980s, won several awards; 1994's *Rice People*, which followed the struggles of a rural family, became the first Cambodian film to be submitted for a (foreign language) Oscar; 2003's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* brought together ex-prisoners and their former captors in Tuol Sleng prison, the former high school where the atrocities took place; 2012's *Duchy: Master of the Forces of Hell* features interviews with a Khmer Rouge leader convicted of crimes against humanity, a chilling encounter Panh also recalls in his book.

"I do other films to show that I can," he says, referencing 2008's *The Sea Wall*, his feature adaptation of the 1950 novel by Marguerite Duras starring French actress Isabelle Huppert. "I have a choice to do films that make a lot of money. But if you go this way, if you make, say, a comedy film, you will not come back. I was a first-generation Khmer film director after the genocide. I felt that my place was to give Cambodia a view from the inside. We needed to write our own story."

He is no fan of Roland Joffe's multiple-Oscar-winning 1984 film *The Killing Fields*: "It is very, very difficult to represent death by genocide. While I recognise that films like *The Killing Fields* and [Steven Spielberg's World War II epic] *Schindler's List* attracted the attention of millions of people, these directors did not experience the genocide.

"Of course I am humble and I applaud them. I could not direct a huge cast in how to kill and how to die. But I have to find other ideas." What, then, of Jolie? Having first visited Cambodia in 2000 to film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, then going on to adopt her Cambodian-born son Maddox in 2002, the Hollywood A-lister and activist is a long-time fan of the country. But she too did not experience the genocide. Does her outsider status help or hinder a film like *First They Killed My Father*?

Panh beams. "I love Angelina very much, mainly because she is authentic. When she flew to Cambodia to meet me I was impressed by her very European sensibility, the fact she understood everything so well. I liked that she wanted to make the film in Khmer. Which was about time," he says wryly. "In *Schindler's List* all the Nazis speak English.

"Before filming began Angelina issued a

statement to the crew stipulating that they were to respect the Cambodian people, stating that this was Cambodia's history, not theirs. Every day she would come to me alone with her driver; at lunchtimes she would wait by herself in a taxi queue, in the heat. I don't know how she is seen elsewhere but in my country Angelina Jolie is very loved."

Panh has a singular aesthetic as a filmmaker, a style originating in trauma and developed to contain it. His films are thoughtful, elegiac, with an austerity that makes them more powerful. Violence is implied, the humanity of victims and survivors implicit. His is a cinema of hope, and of memory. "When I was in the village with my family, forced to wear black, I would sometimes imagine myself in colour. If I remembered a tune, I would keep it as my private souvenir deep in my heart, so that it could not be destroyed or taken away. Art is like this. It is a form of resistance that can keep you alive.

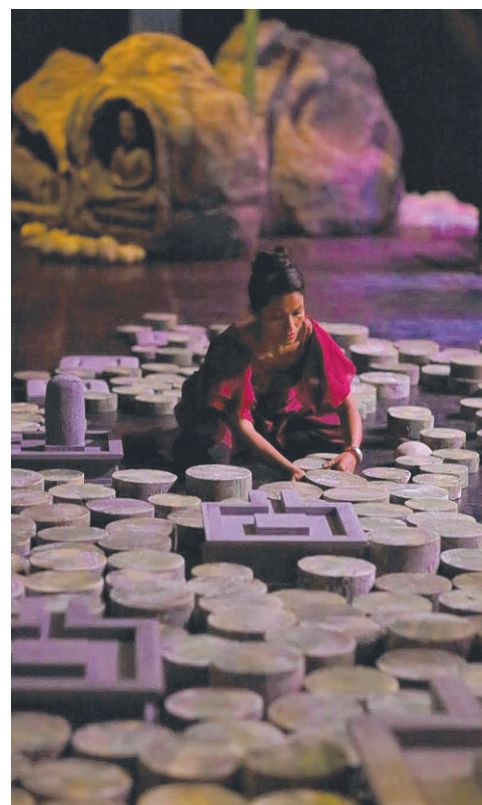
"This is why I believe a piece like *Bangsokol*

can change attitudes by bringing people together to think about humanity, about war. Get them talking to their children, strengthening the next generation, the ones who have the capacity to reaffirm their identity and bring back imagination. Otherwise," he adds, his gaze steady, "history will repeat."

As Panh writes in *The Elimination*, the history of Cambodia is in the deepest sense our history, human history. The responsibility he feels to tell his country's story, whether through film, theatre or in person, is palpable.

"So many died trying to protect others. It's as if there is a train, and these very courageous people got up to give me their seat, their place. I have to do something with that. This is why I am here." He gazes out the window and smiles. "I owe it to the dead, as much as to the living."

A Requiem for Cambodia: Bangsokol runs at Hamer Hall on Friday and Saturday as part of Melbourne Festival.



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