

Xiao Han
Professor Granshaw
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Study Guide

Playwright biography

Lauren Yee is a playwright living in New York. She was born and raised in San Francisco. Yee's plays are vastly inspired by her family lore. Growing up in Chinatown San Francisco, Yee incorporates her family history and cultural collision in her plays such as *The Great Leap* and *King of Yees*. Coming from an immigrant family, Yee wants the audience to see communities that people have never seen on stage. She wants to tell their stories that have never been heard. Currently, Yee is a Residency 5 playwright at Signature Theatre, a New Dramatist member, a Ma-Yi writer's lab member, a former Princeton University Hodder fellow, and a Playwrights Realm alumni playwright.

Work Cited

Janiak, Lily. "*Lauren Yee reaps theatrical riches from family lore.*" Datebook, March 27, 2019, datebook.sfchronicle.com/theater/lauren-yee-reaps-theatrical-riches-from-family-lore.

Yee, Lauren. laurenyee.com/about/.

Production History

Cambodian Rock Band premiered at South Coast Rep in March 2018 directed by Chay Yew, with subsequent productions at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, La Jolla Playhouse, Victory Gardens, City Theatre, Merrimack Rep, Signature Theatre, Portland Center Stage, and Jungle Theatre.

Directed by Marti Lyons, *Cambodian Rock Band* had its Pittsburgh premiere at City Theatre Company in September 2019. It was presented with Victory Garden Theater and Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

Work Cited

"*Cambodian Rock Band.*" City Theatre Company. citytheatrecompany.org/play/cambodian-rock-band/

"*Cambodian Rock Band Overview.*" South Coast Repertory.

www.scr.org/calendar/view?id=9172.

Summary of the Action

Cambodian Rock Band tells the story of Neary, a Cambodian American who came to Cambodia to work on the case of Duch, who used to be the supervisor of S-21 prison of the Khmer Rouge, the genocidal regime in 1970s Cambodia, and helped Pol Pot prosecute around 20,000 people. Two years after Neary has been in Cambodia for the case, her father, Chum, comes to Cambodia to visit her in 2008. As Neary prepares to launch the search for a possible eighth survivor of S-21, she accidentally finds out Chum is the eighth survivor.

Unwilling to share his story at first, Chum finally decides to reveal the story of how he survived the Khmer Rouge. In April 1975, despite Chum having planned to fly to Paris with his family, he decides to stay for a couple more days to celebrate New Year's and to finish the last recording with his band. However, the next day on New Year's Day, the Khmer Rouge takes over Phnom Penh. The band members flee to different places, and, in 1978, Chum ends up in the S-21 prison where Duch was in charge. In S-21 Chum meets Leng, who used to be in the same band as Chum and became an executioner, working under Duch. With Leng's help, Chum is not executed immediately. Later, in an interrogation, Duch discovers Chum's musical talent, and he finds that music could help him finally fall asleep at night. Even though music was not allowed at that time, Duch kept Chum alive. The day before the Central Committee comes to inspect the prison, Chum confronts Duch, and Duch decides to force Leng to execute Chum. However, Chum escapes the prison at the expense of killing his friend, Leng. Back in 2008, Chum finds Neary sitting in a museum which used to be the S-21 prison. After learning her father's story, Neary eventually reconciles with Chum.

Work Cited

Yee, Lauren. "*Cambodian Rock Band*." Samuel French, 2018.

Cultural Context

The Khmer Rouge regime

The Khmer Rouge is a popular name given to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, led by Pol Pot and Nuon Che. The Khmer Rouge regime wanted to build an ideal, self-sufficient agrarian society grounded in ultranationalism and collectivism. However, it ended up being a genocidal and authoritarian regime. The Khmer Rouge regime took over Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia on April 17, 1975. Between April 1975 and January 1979, the Khmer Rouge carried out a genocide that led to the deaths of approximately two million people, between one quarter to one third of Cambodia's pre-1975 population. People, if not being executed, were forced to relocate to agricultural communes.

The Khmer Rouge views the genocide and the agricultural revolution as the way the party sought to liberate Cambodia from historical foreign influences, abolish private property and currency, and establish a new society under a Communist-inspired vision of collective ownership. Education, marriage, religion and other social institutions were either destroyed or converted to align with the political philosophy of the Khmer Rouge. Among the elimination,

artwork and artists that were viewed as being incongruous with the regime's philosophy suffered greatly. Many of them ended up being murdered or went missing (Tyner, 2019).

Tuol Sleng Prison (S-21) is a former secondary school that was converted into a prison during the Khmer Rouge regime. From 1976 to 1979, approximately 20,000 people were imprisoned in S-21. On July 26, 2010, the chief of Tuol Sleng Prison, Kang Kek Lew (alias Duch), was convicted for crimes against humanity and was sentenced to life imprisonment (Greene, 2015).

Cambodian Rock in the 1960s-1970s

Performing arts, especially music, have always been an important part of the life of Cambodian people both in cities and in villages. When Sihanouk started his ambitious national modernization project in the 1950s, young urban people embraced it and developed Cambodian Rock music, one of many modern art forms that emerged in this period.

Cambodian Rock and Roll was created by musicians who were inspired by Western popular artists mostly from France, the United States and the United Kingdom, such as the Beatles and Cliff Richards. Beyond imitating, Cambodian musicians combined different elements of Western music and produced an original modern Khmer sound with their own interpretation and style.

The music industries were dominated by males. Songwriters and composers were almost exclusively men, among them Pov Sipor, Mer Bun, Sin Sisamouth, Kung Van Choeun, Has Salon, Voy Ho, Malapi, Ouk Sinareth, and Samneang Rithy. Rock and Roll bands, such as Apsara, Bayon, Amara, Gadura, Sakira, and Drakkar were also exclusively male. Women in the music industry were mostly singers, such as Ros Serey Sothea, Pen Ron, and Huy Meas, who worked for the National Radio. They usually performed traditional repertoire with Jazz and Western popular music influence, instead of Hard Rock. (Saphan)

Works Cited

- Greene, Roberta R. "Resilience and Healing among Cambodian Survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime." *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2015, pp. 579-587.
- Saphan, LinDa. "FROM MODERN ROCK TO POSTMODERN HARD ROCK: CAMBODIAN ALTERNATIVE MUSIC VOICES." *Ethnic Studies Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 23-0_7. *ProQuest*, <http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/docview/1717277088?accountid=14709>.
- Tyner, James A. *The Nature of Revolution : Art and Politics under the Khmer Rouge*, University of Georgia Press, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central,

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5628216>.

Questions to engage audiences – write three questions to help prepare audiences before seeing the production and three discussion questions for after they see the production.

Pre-show

1. Has there been a moment when music impacts your life? What was it?
2. What is an interesting family story of yours?
3. What do you think of when you hear the name *Cambodian Rock Band*?

Post-show

1. Has your opinion changed about Cambodia after you've seen the show? If so, what has changed?
2. Chum stayed in Cambodia to finish recording with the band knowing the country was going to be taken over. Would you have done the same? What are some other things that you think are worth taking the risk for?
3. If you were Chum, would you have done the same and kept the secret from Neary for so long?