

## Punch in the Gut Ascends to Hope

*By Nina Milligan, November 28, 2011*

Wednesday evening's "stage read" of *Red Earth Gold Gate Shadow Sky* opened with Jose Abaonag, the actor playing the part of the older Cam, presenting a Shakespearian chorus style speech, standing boldly in front of us, upbraiding the audience for their ignorance, their callousness regarding the plight of the Cambodians.

Like many Americans, having lived most my life in the shelter of suburbia, I was not emotionally prepared for the verbal beating Cam unleashed. I found it off-putting, even offensive. But this character grew on me over the course of the evening. Later in the play when he pointed his accusatory finger and shouted at me, giving me that opening "attitude," and I was fine about it. I understood him better by then, understood why he was so pushy.

The play is about a father, mother, daughter and son's fight for their lives in war-torn Cambodia, and their escape. Throughout the mid-Twentieth Century Cambodians were victimized, first by the Americans as by-standers to the Vietnam War, then by their own, Khmer Rouge.

But even if you never got used to the gritty elements of this play, the outstanding performances would win your heart. This is especially true about Sreymom Serey, who played the part of Cam's mother. Serey anchored the play, rarely reading from the script, but even then she convinced us of her tender, motherly love. Fighting life-threatening situations, she admonished Cam as any fearful mother would, her desperation and the unwavering devotion recognizable, even though the harsh circumstances were not.

The character Cam described the story as both "terrifying and beautiful," so terrifying it was not easy to watch at times. The play made no attempt to gloss over the brutality many Cambodians suffered. But even some of the most terrifying scenes had a beautiful aura. And some scenes were just plain beautiful.

One beautiful and terrifying scene was "hostage time," in which the actors used bamboo stick-puppets to pantomime the miserable life of starvation and brutality the family endured in a prisoner's camp. The skinny, fragile bodies of the puppets punched me in the gut with their authenticity and delicacy. The puppets paid tribute to Sopheap Pich, a Cambodian who inspired the design of this play. His bamboo sculptures will be featured at the Henry Art Gallery on the University of Washington campus starting Friday, November 10, 2011.

In contrast to the poignant pain of "hostage time" an interlude of beautiful plays within the play provided respite from the fraught storyline. In one such sub-play two of the minor actors mimed an elegantly charming love story. In another a traditional Cambodian love song softened our hearts and gave us a smile of hope.

But that delightful intermezzo was not to last. The challenges the Cambodian family faced had only just begun and we had to return to the story at hand. Thank goodness for the break, though; without it I could not have endured the further tribulation yet to come.

At the end, a good two hours later, we learned that only Part I was provided. Redundancies and excessive words could be removed to make a tight, poignant play, and leave time for Part II. This lengthy performance tried my patience at times.

But even with these flaws and the challenging content, my departing mood was hopeful. I felt gratitude that I had learned a story that I should have known. My faith in my fellow-man was refreshed. I had grown. So now, even in my squeaky clean suburban life I carry a richer understanding of the world, and intend to welcome refugees, people I had simply looked past before.