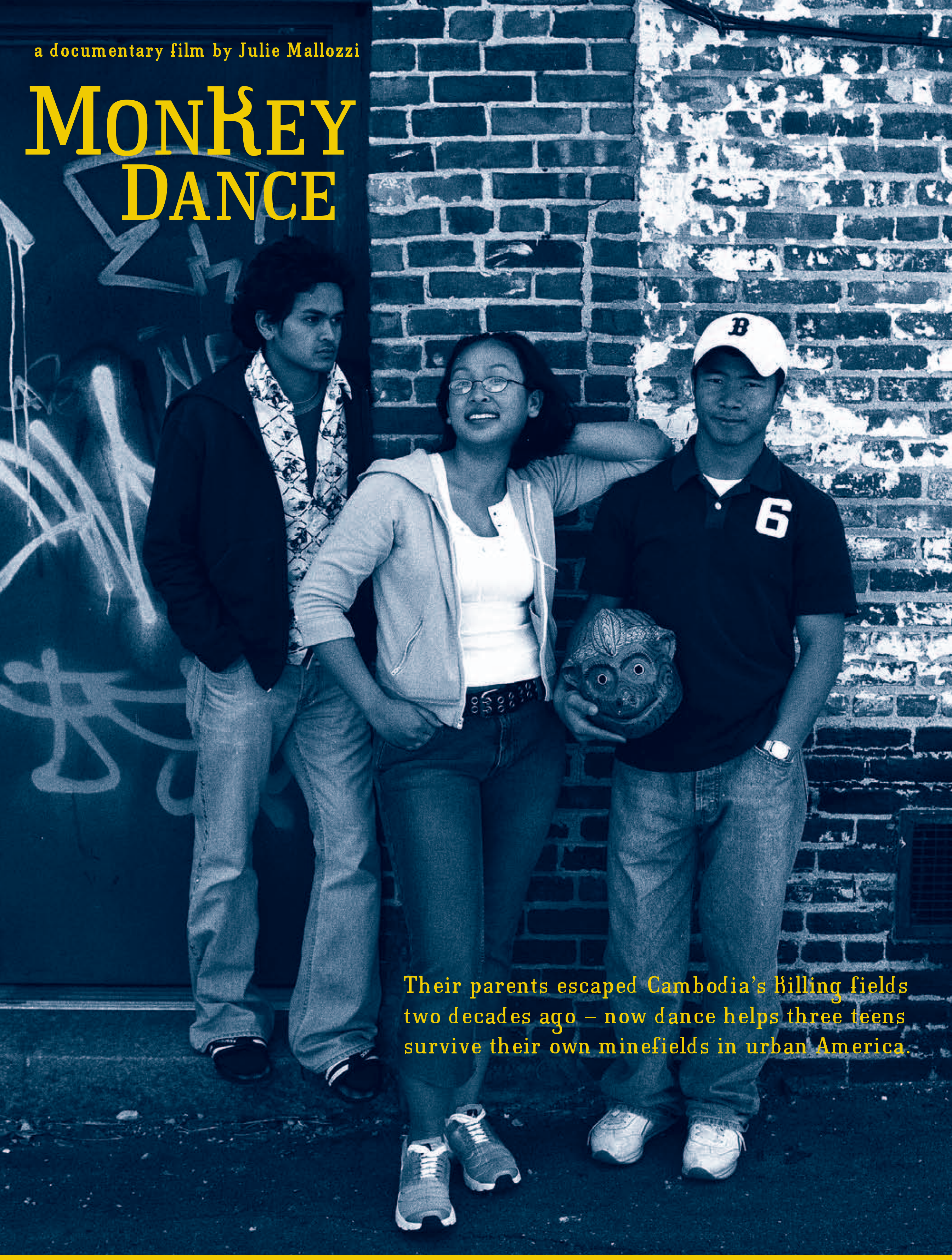
a documentary film by Julie Mallozzi

MONKEY DANCE



Their parents escaped Cambodia's killing fields two decades ago – now dance helps three teens survive their own minefields in urban America.

viewers' guide

Angkor Dance Troupe performs

This Viewers' Guide is designed for use by audiences viewing Monkey Dance, a documentary film and PBS program directed by Julie Mallozzi. The film and this guide can help viewers understand what it means to grow up Cambodian American. These materials can also shed light on immigration issues, the Khmer Rouge genocide, parent-teen conflicts, and traditional Cambodian culture. See the accompanying Classroom Guide for activities students can complete after the screening.

About the Film

Monkey Dance follows the lives of three teens coming of age in Lowell, Massachusetts. Their parents fled war and genocide in Cambodia to resettle in the United States, hoping it would offer safety, employment, and a chance to faithfully rebuild some of what was shattered by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. But for their children, this historic mill city presents a dizzying array of choices – many of them dangerous.

Many Cambodian-American teens fall prey to gang membership, drug use, teen pregnancy, or domestic violence. Samnang, Linda, and Sochenda are determined to avoid the pitfalls their older siblings fell into. And they hope to become the first in their families to go to college.

What joins their stories is traditional Cambodian dance. All three are members of the Angkor Dance Troupe, a rigorous performance group that preserves a world-renowned Cambodian dance tradition nearly annihilated by the Khmer Rouge. Dance gives the three teens confidence, a sense of their roots, and a means of self-expression – especially through the Monkey Dance, a traditional folk tale that has been electrified by the troupe's addition of hip hop choreography.

length: 65 minutes (56-minute TV version available)

Samnang, an athletic 16-year-old when the film begins, was born in a refugee camp. He feels pressured to compensate for his two older brothers' dropping out of high school and their involvement with gangs and drugs.

Linda, a freewheeling 17-year-old who loves racing her car, struggles to overcome the shame cast on her family by her older sister, imprisoned for murdering an abusive boyfriend.

Sochenda, a fashion-conscious 16-year-old, works a series of part-time jobs to pay for the necessities and accessories of teen life – while his mother bemoans his poor school performance.

Choices and Values

The three teens in *Monkey Dance* face difficult choices about how to live their lives. Their parents want them to follow Cambodian tradition: to respect their elders, follow Buddhist practices, and be modest in appearance and relationships. Concerned teachers and mentors encourage them to study hard and get into college. Meanwhile, television and the other mainstream media hype sexuality and consumerism. And neighborhood street gangs push drugs and violence.

During the course of the film, Samnang, Linda, and Sochenda navigate this swirl of competing value systems, and begin to develop their own ideas of right and wrong.

Village life in Cambodia

Buddhist ceremony

Linda studies traditional dance in Cambodia

Traditional Cambodian Culture

Cambodia is a small country of about 13 million people located in Southeast Asia between Thailand and Vietnam. While similar in some ways to these neighbors, Cambodia has a distinctive culture that traces many of its features back to India, from its Sanskrit-based text to its mythic traditions and Buddhist religious practices.

During a period of about six hundred years, between AD 802 and 1431, the Angkor civilization of Cambodia was the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia. Dozens of magnificent stone temples were constructed, including the most famous, Angkor Wat. Its signature five towers adorn the Cambodian national flag. Today these temples attract tourists from all over the world, who marvel at the pinnacle of ancient Khmer architecture and art.

Currently, about four-fifths of Cambodia's population lives in rural areas. Many people survive as rice farmers, using water buffaloes to cultivate the flooded rice paddies. Traditional Cambodian, or Khmer, culture is very complex; some of its easily seen features include gracious hospitality, respect for elders, modesty, concern for community approval, and a desire to shelter young girls until they are married. Most Cambodians practice a form of folk Buddhism filled with personal rituals and public ceremonies to mark weddings, funerals, and seasonal events.

Ancient Moves

Traditional dance is a hallmark of Khmer culture. For centuries, female court dancers in gilded costumes performed classical dance exclusively for the king in his palace. By the mid-1900s, folk dances for men and women based on fishing, rice harvesting, and other village activities became popular. But in the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge regime targeted dancers and other artists for death because they represented Cambodia's old, "elite" culture. Approximately 90% of Cambodia's traditional dancers were killed. It is a testament to the strength of the Khmer people that the surviving dancers could piece together the remnants of their tradition so that both classical and folk dances can be enjoyed worldwide today.

A Turbulent Century

Khmer Rouge soldiers

Torture victim with ID label

Refugees flee Cambodia

The Cambodian genocide led by Pol Pot in the late 1970s culminated a century of violence and destruction endured by the Cambodian people. Much of this turmoil was imposed from the outside.

During the age of classical imperialism in the 1890s, France dominated Southeast Asia and exploited so-called "French Indochina" for rubber and raw materials in a system of plantations reminiscent of feudal times. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, during World War II, the Japanese Empire attempted to wrest economic and political control of Southeast Asia from France, beginning a cycle of direct military violence that would last for forty years.

After the war, France attempted to reassert its domination over Southeast Asia, including Vietnam and Cambodia, with disastrous results for all sides. The French began a complete withdrawal from all of Southeast Asia after a catastrophic military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam in 1954. Into this seeming power vacuum entered the United States, determined to keep the region from becoming a communist stronghold.

President Kennedy began direct military intervention in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s. The Vietnam War escalated broadly under President Johnson in the middle and late 1960s, including covert action in Cambodia. Concerned that Cambodia would become a refuge for its North Vietnamese enemies, President Nixon authorized direct bombing and incursions into Cambodia by U.S. forces. Some historians argue that these years of U.S. military action brutalized the Cambodian people and in some way helped engender the horror that was to come.

After the United States withdrew from Cambodia in the early 1970s, the Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, took control of the country. The Khmer Rouge ("Red Khmers," then formally known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea) established the state of Democratic Kampuchea in April 1975 and launched one of the most radical experiments in social engineering of the twentieth century. They aimed to create a classless utopian society – to erase two thousand years of Cambodian history and begin again at "Year Zero."

The Khmer Rouge began by emptying all Cambodian cities of their population and sending residents to forced labor camps. They abolished religion, schools, hospitals, banking, and private property. Traditional kinship systems were replaced with communal relationships. Labor camp leaders maintained constant fear by feeding workers only a small amount of rice every day and killing those who did not work hard enough.

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge tortured, interrogated, raped, and killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Many of the victims were children and the elderly. Some were executed en masse in one of the infamous "killing fields" around the countryside. In order to rid Cambodia of so-called "impurities," the Khmer Rouge specifically targeted educated people, artists, monks, urban dwellers, and anyone perceived as opposing the new regime.

Estimates on the total death toll during this period vary widely, but Western scholars calculate that 1.5 to 1.8 million people died from execution, disease, starvation, and overwork. This represents 20 to 25 percent of the total Cambodian population in 1975.

The carnage did not end until neighboring Vietnam, now united under Communist rule, invaded Cambodia to dislodge Pol Pot. Cambodia still struggles to overcome its dark history and the legacy of poverty, corruption, and millions of leftover land mines.

During the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, refugees streamed into neighboring Thailand, where vast refugee camps were constructed. The United States, tacitly acknowledging its own role in destabilizing Cambodia, accepted thousands of refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Primary relocation sites were set mostly along the West Coast of the United States to receive the new arrivals. Secondary resettlement sites were designated across the country, including Lowell, Massachusetts.

"Under the Khmer Rouge we had to work and work. If you stopped digging they would kill you."
– Sochenda's mother, Seangly Suong

"The journey to Thailand was very hard. We were sick and hurting, and there were lots of land mines. Many died along the way."
– Sochenda's father, Sochea Uch

Lowell: An Immigrant City

Lowell, Massachusetts, is not a large city but it holds an important place in American history for its role in the country's industrial revolution, labor movement, and immigration.

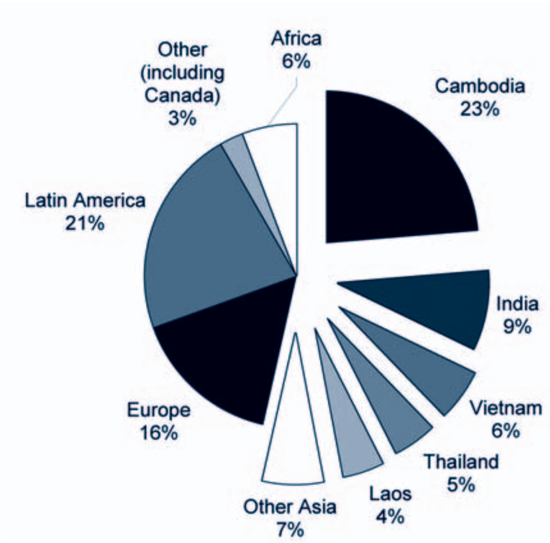
In the early 1800s, wealthy American merchants hoped to replicate England's industrial revolution and achieve great profits while avoiding the appalling work conditions that English workers faced. Selecting a site near the confluence of two rivers, they hired Irish Catholic immigrants to dig a series of power canals by hand. In a bold new initiative, they recruited young farm women from northern New England to work in the new textile mills.

During a brief golden age from about 1820 to1840, profits were enormous and workers were infinitely better off than their English counterparts. Dozens of mills were constructed over a canal system that grew to nearly ten miles. Lowell became one of the most populous cities in the United States.

"It's hard to grow up in Lowell, 'cause there's a lot of gangs around.... Just growing up not having much money or whatever, you have to deal with a lot." *– Samnang*

Southeast Asian schoolchildren in Lowell

Origins of Lowell's Foreign-Born



A cotton spinner ca. 1918

Greek girl at Giavis Market

Signs of urban decay

After the young women operating the power looms led America's first organized labor strikes, Lowell's work force began to change. Beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, the mill girls were replaced by French-Canadian immigrants who were willing to accept the lower wages and harsher living conditions demanded by the mill owners. They were followed by waves of immigrant workers from Poland, Greece, Portugal, and other countries. Yet except for boosts during successive wartime periods, Lowell's textile industry gradually declined and by the late 1950s had all but collapsed. The population, which had peaked at 150,000, began to decrease.

Lowell's economy began to rebound again in the 1970s, when the high-tech industry boomed and the Lowell National Historical Park was created. Job opportunities brought new groups of people to Lowell – this time primarily refugees from Cambodia and other Southeast Asian nations.

These new residents suffered perhaps the most when one of Lowell's major employers, Wang Labs, began to falter in the late 1980s. With unemployment and crime on the rise, Lowell became a dangerous and depressing place to grow up. As the 21st century dawns, Lowell is beginning to diversify its economy, develop more cultural activities, and once again attract new immigrants – now from India, West Africa, and Latin America.

Parental Concerns

"Cambodians say that the leaf does not fall far from the tree. But with some children the leaf does fall far from the tree, because they follow the wind and friends pull them along."
– *Sochenda's father,* Sochea Uch

Most Cambodian refugees arrived in America speaking almost no English, knowing little of American culture, and having few job skills applicable to modern society. Even many families that arrived in America 25 years ago, as refugees from the Khmer Rouge, still struggle to make ends meet. Parents often work multiple low-wage jobs in factories or service industries and cannot spend as much time with their children as they would like. They do their best to preserve their culture by speaking Khmer at home, cooking Cambodian food, attending Buddhist temple, and living according to traditions from their homeland.

Their children are growing up in a multicultural society, where English is their language of choice and American pop culture their natural habitat. Cambodian parents are often shocked by their children's choice of hairstyle, clothing, music, or friends. In *Monkey Dance*, Sochenda's parents are disturbed when he dyes his hair blonde and joins a boy-band that wears outrageous costumes on stage. Hungry to express himself, Sochenda decides to dress as he pleases but at least remove his earrings when he is with his parents or their friends.

Samnang's mother at the tool factory

Sochenda's mother talks about her children

Linda's father suits up for work

Most Cambodian-American parents hope their children respect their elders and stay close to their families. For them, success might mean not just getting good grades in school, but helping out with family matters. Samnang's mother, who works long hours at a tool factory to support the family, hopes that after Sam finishes school he will help them buy a house. At the end of the film, she breaks into tears when describing how Sam knew to think of her when choosing what college to attend.

As a girl growing up in Lowell's Cambodian community, Linda feels pressure to conform to expectations that she be quiet and modest and stay at home most of the time. Her father Tim finds it hard to watch Linda date many different boys and drive all over town in her souped-up car. Tim realizes that he needs to give Linda some freedom to be herself. When she has a serious car accident, though, he worries that he is doing something wrong. "Raising children in the United States is difficult," he says. "It's like cultivating a plant. If you give too much fertilizer, the plant dies. But if you don't give enough water, the plant withers."

"We try so hard to raise Sam to follow the right path. I hope that after he finishes school he'll help me buy a house or help with the family." *– Samnang's mother, Sokkorn Sem*

Linda's mother cooks at home

Samnang gets sewn into his costume

"Since Linda got to high school, I've had difficulties with her. Sometimes she doesn't listen to us. I worry that she'll do something wrong." *– Linda's father, Tim Chan Thou*

Teenage Temptations

Girls at a car show

A hot rod

Sochenda styles his hair

At one point in the film, Linda shows us the car she bought and explains, "Once you have a car, it's like, anything is possible. You can just go and do whatever you want, whenever you want – and there's nothing stopping you."

For many American teenagers, cars symbolize freedom, personal expression, and pride of ownership. They are willing to work long hours at after-school jobs in order to buy a car and pay for insurance. Some teens decide to spend large amounts of money to turn their humble cars into hot rods by adding accessories like fancy bodywork, special rims, booming stereos, and illegal systems to make the cars go faster. High-speed races often end in tragedy.

Aside from cars, American teens face a number of temptations that are glamorized by the media: sex, drugs, expensive fashion, and violent or explicit music. Earning and spending money often take precedence over homework or other constructive activities like sports, arts, or volunteer work. When Sochenda looks back on his teen years, he wishes he had spent his time differently: "In high school I'd go to school like it was a fashion runway. You always had to look your best for some reason. When I started to fall apart I realized that I've got to start doing the things I want to do, to get me somewhere."

Samnang's older brothers both got involved with gangs and drugs and didn't finish high school. One of them married young because he got his girlfriend pregnant. Cambodian-American teens have disproportionately high rates of teen pregnancy, drug use, and gang membership. Experts point to a breakdown in families after the Khmer Rouge genocide and the refugee experience. Poverty exacerbates the problem, as parents working double shifts cannot adequately supervise their children. Cultural confusion and a lack of self-esteem often lead teenagers towards dangerous choices.

Sochenda in his spare time

"Once you have a car, anything is possible." – *Linda*

"At one time, my older brothers joined a gang and got involved in a lot of negative things. I almost took that path, too." – *Samnang*

"In high school I'd always go to school like it was a fashion runway. You always had to look your best for some reason." – *Sochenda*

Stepping into the Future

Sam teaches the Monkey Dance

Linda at Angkor Wat in Cambodia

Sochenda at art school

Samnang, Linda, and Sochenda are exceptional young people who manage to overcome poverty, peer pressure, and a legacy of genocide. All three have bright futures.

Samnang remains the most closely involved with Angkor Dance Troupe. He wins a an award from a local charity for the long hours he spends mentoring younger children, including giving them lessons on the Monkey Dance. His own mentor, Jim, helps him successfully apply to college – though getting scholarships is an uphill battle. Never straying far from his family, Sam avoids the path his brothers followed and makes his parents proud.

Linda travels to Cambodia and performs with some of that country's most respected traditional dancers. There she realizes that despite decades of war and poverty, life in Cambodia seems happy: "In America, everyone's so busy running around, doing this, paying bills, working all these crazy hours. And in Cambodia it's like, sunrise, sunset, and everyone's home, eating – they eat meals together, they spend time together." Linda returns from Cambodia resolved to stop wasting her time on hot rods and parties and instead focus on her long-term goals: to support her family and community and achieve success in her own career.

Sochenda wanders perhaps the farthest in his quest to discover himself. At first he is drawn to fashion, ever-changing hairstyles, and expensive car accessories – leading him to work a series of part-time jobs and neglect his schoolwork. These decisions have serious consequences when he fails to get into college, but eventually Sochenda discovers that his real goal is to become an artist or industrial designer. He focuses on his studies and, a year later, moves toward his goal by getting into an art college.

Acknowledgements

Chuck Caragianes *is a History and English teacher with the Lowell Public Schools. He received his M.Ed. in Curriculum Design and Instruction from Northeastern University in 1990 and has worked professionally designing curricular materials with the American Social History Project based in New York City. He has completed three student-based collaborative projects with the Lowell National Historical Park, and has presented numerous workshops across the country.*

Julie Mallozzi *is a documentary filmmaker based in Boston, Massachusetts. Her films explore the interactions between cultures thrown together by history and between politics and personal stories. Julie's debut film,* Once Removed, *tells the story of meeting her mother's family in China and learning about their involvement in China's complicated political history.* Monkey Dance *is her second film. Julie studied filmmaking at Harvard University, where she currently teaches.*

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assistance with text and images: Marc Miller, Andrew Ott, Anshu Wahi

If You Want to Know More

Books

Cambodian Culture Since 1975: Homeland and Exile, *ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood, 1994*

Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors, *Dith Pran, 1998*

Cotton Was King: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts, *ed. Arthur L. Eno, Jr., 1976*

The Continuing Revolution, *ed. Robert Weible, 1991*

First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers, *Loung Ung, 2000*

Fractured Identities: Cambodia's Children of War, *James Higgins and Joan Ross, 1997*

A History of Cambodia, *David Chandler, 2000*

Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community, *Nancy Smith-Hefner, 1999*

The Sorrow of War, *Bao Ninh, 1994*

Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison, *David Chandler, 1999*

Documentary Films

"a.k.a. Don Bonus," *Spencer Nakasako, 1995*

"Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic, and Madness," *The Gardner Group, 1999*

"First They Killed My Father," *NHK Japan, 2000*

"Floating on the Lotus Flowers," *Brandon Wathana Eang and Matthew Scott, 2000*

"The Flute Player," *Jocelyn Glatzer, 2002*

"Rebuilding the Temple: Cambodians in America," *Lawrence R. Hott and Claudia Levin*

"Refugee," *Spencer Nakasako, 2003*

"S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine," *Rithy Panh, 2003*

"Tenth Dancer," *Sally Ingleton and Denise Patience, 1993*

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Image Sources

American Textile History Museum: p. 9 (top); James Gerrand: p. 6 (top); James Higgins: p. 8, 9 (bottom); Julie Mallozzi: p. 4 (bottom), 5, 9 (middle), 10, 11, 12, 14; National Archive: p. 4 (top), p. 6 (bottom); Andrew Ott: p. 9 (data from the Urban Institute); Andrew Page: p. 1, 2, 3, 13, 16; Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum: p. 6 (middle); Tsongas Industrial History Center: p. 4 (map).

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Fusing Old and New

Linda's father, Tim Chan Thou, learned traditional Cambodian dance in a refugee camp in Thailand. After he arrived in Lowell, he co-founded the Angkor Dance Troupe. Now one of the most acclaimed Cambodian dance groups in the U.S., the troupe aims to preserve Cambodian culture by teaching young people about this important part of their heritage. The troupe's signature piece is Swa Pol, the Monkey Dance, which is based on a legend from the Reamker (the Khmer adaptation of the Indian epic, Ramayana) about monkey soldiers celebrating a win on the battlefield. The troupe has modernized the Monkey Dance by adding hip hop choreography – all the while remaining true to character as wily, acrobatic monkeys.

Please see our website to participate in the film's online community: www.monkey-dance.com