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WHITE BUILDING

A FILM BY **KAVICH NEANG**

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78
MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2021
Orizzonti Award Best Actor

PISETH CHHUN • SITHAN HOUT • SOKHA UK
CHINNARO SOEM • SOVANN THO • JANY MIN • CHANDALIN Y

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SAMNANG, faces the demolition of his lifelong home in Phnom Penh coupled with pressures from family, friends, and neighbours, which all arise and intersect at this moment of sudden change.

INTERVIEW WITH KAVICH NEANG

❖ What is the history behind the White Building in Phnom Penh?

The White Building was a large apartment building designed in 1963 by Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap and Franco-Ukrainian Vladimir Bodiansky, according to urban renovation plans conceived by modernizer Vann Molyvann back in the days of King Sihanouk. As a state-owned building in the heart of the city, it was intended for Ministry of Culture civil servants. It was emptied during the rule of the Khmer Rouge and then, in the 1980s, it was reinhabited by people like my father, a sculptor. Badly maintained, it aged quickly. By the early 2000s, it had earned a bad reputation, as drug dealers and prostitutes moved in. I grew up with them as my neighbors. Rumors of imminent demolition had been circulating for years. In 2014, we heard that the government planned to knock down the White Building and redevelop the area, by selling the land to a Japanese company that was willing to pay top dollar. They offered apartment owners financial compensation, which is rarely the case in property conflicts, or there was an option for residents to be rehoused in the new highrise building that was being planned. The residents took the money and moved out. Leaving was heartbreaking. We were all deeply attached to the building, but we had no choice. "The Building," as we all called it, was knocked down in 2017. And in 2019, news went around that the land had been sold to a Hong Kong company that plans to build a casino.

❖ This is your first feature, but the White Building is a recurring presence in your filmography since your earliest documentaries. More than a backdrop or home, it seems to be the black box of your personal story.

Yes, because that's where I was born and grew up. It was a unique building and symbolized a period that is being lost. We

formed a community of painters, musicians, seamstresses and so on. Everybody's door was open. There was a special atmosphere that allowed me to grow as an artist. When I was younger, I started by doing traditional dance with an NGO, Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), before learning sound recording and video editing in their tiny studio. That's how I started out...

❖ What changes are shaping Phnom Penh?

The city is being transformed. Old buildings are disappearing, taking swathes of our past with them, while condos, malls and modern air-conditioned stores pop up everywhere. The Chinese presence is noticeably growing. But what has changed most, I'd say, is the rhythm of the city. Its inhabitants are more stressed as it becomes harder to go at their usual pace. Even so, their mentality is the same as ever. I consider myself a witness to these changes, which are partially due to globalization. Today, thanks to new technologies, everything is faster. It's an interesting period for a filmmaker: documenting these transformations and being part of them is a chance to generate awareness and memories for future generations.

❖ What was your approach to this film, and how is it linked to your documentary *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* ?

I started work on this project in 2016, planning to make a feature film about young dancers in The Building, but the long process of writing and obtaining funding slowed me down while things were speeding up in real life. When the demolition was confirmed, I couldn't focus on writing any longer. I felt compelled to capture what was happening on a camera lent to me by a friend. I filmed my family and neighbors with a small crew,

thinking that the documentary could become part of the feature. As it went along, however, the documentary found a voice and existence of its own, and it became *Last Night I Saw You Smiling*, which was released in 2019. It influenced the feature. In the documentary, I felt passive with regard to the evacuation of the apartment where I lived with my parents, powerless to fight overwhelming forces. Whereas in the feature, I was able to reimagine those forces, create coherent characters and, in a way, fight despair and forgetting, in order to question audiences and provoke debate.

❖ Are the film's characters based on real people?

Yes, Samnang, the young protagonist, is my alter ego, but in reverse, in the sense that he observes what's going on but is not passive. He asks questions and tries to make his voice heard. His father in the film is like mine. His toe becomes infected due to diabetes, which happened to my father in real life. Like a lot of Cambodians, he didn't trust the doctors and stubbornly applied natural remedies using honey and tamarind until it ended up requiring amputation. As for the mother, she is a lot like mine.


CAMBODIA'S
NEXT

❖ Most of the cast are non-professionals. How did you meet them?

I'd worked with two of them on my short, *New Land Broken Road*, shot in 2017. I was already mapping out *White Building*, but I received funding from a Malaysian TV network to make a short on the theme of young love. I thought it was a good chance to cut my teeth on fiction before making a feature, and I chose a line from my script to develop a story around these young dancers. I was casting hip-hop dancers, which was when I met Piseth Chhun, who plays Samnang. I liked his raw edge, his charisma and innocence. Chinnaro Soem, who plays Ah Kha, was also cast in the short. At first, I didn't think of them for *White Building*, but they became the obvious choice shortly before the shoot. Sovann Tho, who plays their friend Tol is a professional circus performer with an NGO, Phare Ponleu Selapak. He's funny and so natural, which really appealed to me. The father was trickier because professional actors in Cambodia tend to overact. I met Sithan Hout, a filmmaker who trained in Russia and who also teaches film theory, as well as performing in *lakhaon niyeay* (spoken theatre). He was slightly paralyzed by an accident, and I wondered if it was over the top because the father in the film develops a handicap. He turned out to be the right choice, and we directed him toward nuances that helped him find the right pitch for the character. Sokha Uk, the mother, is also a modern Khmer theatre actress.

❖ Your recent films focus on Cambodian youth, who comprise the majority of the country's population. What is your take on them?

Cambodians have a contemplative, sometimes overly laidback side to them. My parents' generation is exhausted. It focuses on work and security, and carries the trauma of war. The younger generation is more dynamic and passionate, with dreams for the future. Growing up here, I was not encouraged to express my emotions or talk about my personal life and my future. It is a matter of tradition and culture. And politically, we are not allowed to speak up. I sometimes feel like I live in a country that is half-asleep because it's so slow-moving. By depicting young people, I hope to appeal to a younger audience and infuse them with desires, ambitions and hopes, encouraging them to open up and to develop their critical faculties.

❖ Indeed, in *White Building*, Samnang's mother constantly shuts him down when he tries to speak. Did your parents open up to you about their experiences during

the Khmer Rouge period?

My parents talked to me a little about their lives under the Khmer Rouge, but mostly to make comparisons with the present day, and to tell me and my siblings we didn't know how lucky we were and shouldn't complain, and so on. I wanted to show that aspect of Cambodian culture. Here, people say, "When the grown-ups are talking, listen and don't interrupt." But Samnang asks questions. He has a desire for affirmation.

❖ The film opens with an aerial shot of the full length of the White Building, and later in the film the architecture changes. Your film was shot after the building's demolition. What constraints did that create?

It's what was hardest for me, but also what generated the most creativity. We started pre-production in March 2019. The White Building was gone, but I still had forty hours of documentary footage. I couldn't come up with an alternate location. I felt I'd gone blind. It was so hard to turn the page. My team found other buildings, such as Block TanPa or the former Pasteur Institute building, which date from the same period. I started to see The Building instead as a symbolic place, gaining perspective on my personal story at the same time. The story I wanted to tell was bigger than that, history repeating itself, as one of the residents told me. She was drawing a parallel with her forced departure and her prior exile in the countryside under the Khmer Rouge. Those other two buildings will most likely meet the same fate as the White Building. For me, they became an abstract space, where I could transpose my emotions. Bringing them to the screen was a fascinating process: how to recreate the brute force of reality? How to go from a shot of a bulldozer destroying your home to a scene played by an actor? I needed to visualize the scenes, to work on the shot breakdown and blocking before finding the locations. Gradually, I freed myself of The Building and placed my trust in my cast and crew to offer their interpretation also.

❖ The father's toe is representative of the social situation in the White Building: a gradual process of decay and necrosis.

Yes, because The Building's dilapidation was very real. When there was heavy rain,

water leaked into our apartment, to the point that we sometimes slept under umbrellas. Residents were scared that the whole thing would come down on their heads one day. The father plays the role of the "village chief" in complete symbiosis with his community. Gradually though, the neighbors turn against him, cracks appear, little things become big deals, and the rot sets in... The father represents that broken generation, victims of the Khmer Rouge, which passed its wounds down to us. If each individual is broken, how can they build something together? For the politicians, it's easy to brandish specters and threats: fear is an efficient tool. Today, unconsciously, we are still traumatized, and our society still suffers from the disease of fear.

❖ What is the meaning behind the three sections of the movie?

Blessings, the first part, represents the insouciance of youth, when you remember a special, very happy day, as if in a dream before the brutal wakeup when you have to face reality and be responsible. The second part, *Spirit House*, is closer to something invisible, a feeling of pressure that may be

spiritual, religious or cultural. For me, it speaks to anxiety and the gulf between generations. Until the dream sequence, which reconstitutes an actual dream I had. According to our belief system, dreaming of a handsome, well-dressed person in excellent health foretells of misfortune. The third part, *Monsoon*, is more bittersweet. A lot of people who were thrown out of the city cannot afford to move back, so they settle in their ancestral villages. In the film, it's a peaceful place, close to nature, but it might be the scene of an impossible reunion for Samnang's family. Just like the rainy season, which refreshes and revitalizes while bringing a hint of melancholy, Samnang is conflicted at the end. We don't know which destiny he will choose: following his family or striking out on his own.

❖ How did you plan the look of the film?

Visually, I imagined something totally different than my documentaries. I had in mind the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Apichatpong Weerasethakul. I worked with Korean-American director of photography Douglas Seok and the French colorist Yov Moor, who is used to working on Asian projects. Yov has a very instinctive approach. Together we sensed if an image captured the emotion or not. The colors follow the development of the story: saturated, vibrant

and upbeat at the beginning; the second part is slightly toned down, sharper when reality is more intrusive; and the third has softer, slightly faded, more vintage colors.

❖ There is what the film shows and what it doesn't show, what remains off camera, such as the violence of the expropriation, as well as the opening toward other horizons. Like Davy Chou's *Diamond Island*, with the figure of the American godfather looming over the action, your film has the French cousin. What does that represent for you?

The cousin represents the Cambodian diaspora in the USA or Europe. Cambodians living overseas encourage their families to join them because they see Cambodia as dangerous. And what's off camera helps to create a climate of tension. Samnang endures the pressure of his best friend's sudden departure, his father's professional obligations and state of health, the conflict

with his sister, and the tensions in the community. I wanted audiences to feel that inexorable pressure in the atmosphere. Like in the scene with the official that Samnang's father meets in his car. He doesn't utter a direct threat, but his softly spoken words and fawning attitude evoke an approaching danger. In that scene, we worked on the sound to create a muffled, enclosed effect as if time has paused before tragedy strikes. Even though we are subjected to social control and films are passed through the censor's filter, at least I can express myself in my movies. That's the reason why art is fundamental in a country such as Cambodia. Art allows feelings to be shared and connections to be made, engendering a form of liberation.

❖ Aged 33 now, you started very young, but happily admit to never picturing yourself as a director. What are the notable encounters that led you where you are today?

I wanted to make movies, but there were no film schools, so a friend introduced me to Davy Chou in 2009, and I took part in a film workshop that he gave for students. Meeting Davy was vital because he opened me up to cinema by showing me lots of films. We became friends and we now have a film production company together. Davy talked to me about the director Rithy Panh, whose work I hadn't seen, and he recommended that I sign up for a documentary workshop that he was giving at the Bophana Center. Rithy Panh helped channel my work as a documentary-maker. I remember him telling me to "be with my subjects" and that "the camera is like a firearm: be careful when you point it at someone."

❖ How did you choose your crew?

White Building is an important project because it's one of the first times that a Cambodian feature, made by a homegrown director has the support of international production companies. The crew was made up of friends and long-term collaborators who all have experience in independent movies, shorts or music videos. They each took on a key role: Kanitha Tith as art director, Sreylin Meas as first assistant director, Danech San as assistant script supervisor, Douglas Seok,

who had worked on my shorts, as DP, Davy Chou producing, Daniel Mattes as co-writer and associate producer. Also, since the film is a coproduction with France via Marine Arrighi and her company Apsara Films, we were joined by French technicians I had already worked with: sound designer Vincent Villa, gaffer Bertrand Prévot, and editor Félix Rehm. I was also able to rely on the support of a local NGO, Pour un sourire d'enfant (PSE), which runs a film section, one of the few professional-level training courses in the country. A dozen students and graduates participated in the project. It was an important first for many of us, including me, and we were lucky to learn and grow together. Working with people who knew me helped me to trust myself in times of self-doubt, and also motivated me to push myself even harder. I feel like we pushed the boundaries together. I realized how true it is that, in film, as in life, you get nowhere on your own!

❖ What is the film industry like in Cambodia?

The Cambodian market is tiny! We are a small country of sixteen million people, few of whom go to the movies, even though the number of multiplexes has exploded in recent years. Very few films are produced locally, and most of those are genre films—comedies, horror movies, romcoms—although our local coproducer, Kongchak Pictures, is shaking things up. Those movies are in competition with Chinese, Thai or Hollywood blockbusters. And young people watch movies online. Funding is another major issue. The Ministry of Culture supports us through its Cinema Department and the Cambodia Film Commission, but there is no public money, so funding needs to be obtained overseas. There are no film schools and professional standards are low. A lot of young people are interested in working in the business now, but there are more directors than producers!

❖ Is that why you cofounded Anti-Archive in 2014 with Franco-Cambodian Davy Chou and Taiwanese-American Steve Chen?

Yes, in the aim of producing our own movies and promoting the growth of a new generation of filmmakers. We are one of the only production companies developing films that I would describe as "slow cinema", films close to real life, personal movies that explore questions of shared experience. These films can seem boring to mainstream Cambodian audiences, who want to be entertained. They want dreams and escapism. But even major local productions that are more original and well put together don't make any money. I have resigned myself to not earning a living from my passion, but rather living out my passion, which gives me a feeling of liberty.

❖ How did Jia Zhang-ke join you in this adventure?

The project was selected in 2016 at the Asian Project Market in Busan. When we sat around a table to discuss production, we wondered why not put it out there in Asia. Flicking through the festival catalogue, we came across Jia Zhang-ke. Since we're fans of his movies, and since he deals with themes relevant to *White Building*, connected with urban transformation, as well as making documentaries, we got in touch and sent him the script. He gave us a positive reply and become a coproducer! It just shows, there's never any harm in trying. ■

INTERVIEW BY
ELÉONORE SOK-HALKOVICH

CREW

Directed by **Kavich Neang** • Written by **Kavich Neang** and **Daniel Mattes** • Cinematography **Douglas Seok** • Sound **Vincent Villa, Sophe-akdey Touch** • Editing **Félix Rehm** • Music **Jean-Charles Bastion** • Set design **Kanitha Tith, Anne-Sorya Fitte** • Costumes **Sovettorn Chea** • Make up **Sreypov Seng** • Casting **Socheata Van, Theavy Veng** • Mixing **Vincent Villa** • Color grading **Yov Moor** • 1st Assistant director **Sreylin Meas** • Script Supervisor **Marion Bernard** • Gaffer **Bertand Prévot** • Line Producer **Camille Boulay** • Producers **Davy Chou, Marine Arrighi de Casanova** • Produced by **Anti-Archive** *(Cambodia)*, **Apsara Films** *(France)* • In coproduction with **Xstream Pictures** *(China)*, **Kongchak Pictures** *(Cambodia)*, **Rotha Moeng**, **Brandon Hashimoto** • With the participation of **CNC Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, Institut Français, Fonds Image de la Francophonie, Visions Sud Est, World Cinema Fund + Europe, Berlinale, German FCF, Federal Foreign Office, Goethe-Institut, Creative Europe - MEDIA Programme of the European Union, Torino Film Lab, Doha Film Institute, Qumra**

French Distribution and International sales **Les Films du Losange**

CAST

Samnang	**Piseth Chhun**
Samnang's father	**Sithan Hout**
Samnang's mother	**Sokha Uk**
Ah Kha	**Chinnaro Soem**
Tol	**Sovann Tho**
Kanha	**Jany Min**
Samphors	**Chandalin Y**

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KAVICH NEANG

Kavich Neang was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 1987. He has directed five short films since 2011. He first studied under Rithy Panh, and in 2013, he joined Busan's Asian Film Academy. In 2014, he co-founded Anti-Archive alongside Davy Chou and Steve Chen. He joined Cannes Cinéfondation's Residency in 2017-18. His 2019 documentary ***Last Night I Saw You Smiling*** won the NETPAC Award at IFFR, the Special Jury Prize at Jeonju, Best Image at Janela de Cinema and two awards at Tokyo FilmEx. ***White Building*** is his first feature film. ■

- **White Building** (2021) Narrative, 90′
- **Last Night I Saw You Smiling** (2019) Documentary, 78′
- **New Land Broken Road** (2018) Narrative, 15′
- **Goodbye Phnom Penh** (2015) Narrative, 17′
- **Three Wheels** (2015) Narrative, 20′
- **Where I Go** (2013) Documentary, 56′
- **A Scale Boy** (2011) Documentary, 17′

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