

April 20, 2020

To Theatre Seminar in Dramaturgy, class of 2020

THEA 1903 Theatre Company

1617 Cathedral of Learning

4200 Fifth Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Dear students, Professor Granshaw and Yuh,

I would like to formally request that you consider Lauren Yee's play *Cambodian Rock Band* to be selected in our 2020-2021 season. *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 a supervisor in the S-21 prison. S-21 prison was one of the torture and execution centers for the Khmer Rouge, the genocidal regime in 1970s Cambodia. Two years after Neary has been in Cambodia for the case, her father, Chum, comes to Cambodia to visit her. As Neary prepares to launch the search for a possible eighth survivor of S-21, she accidentally finds out Chum is the eighth survivor. Then, Chum unveils the story of how he survived the Khmer Rouge from the moment when he and his rock band recorded their last album before Khmer Rouge came to Phnom Penh in 1975 to when Chum ran away from S-21 in 1978.

I think this play would be perfect to be produced in THEA 1903 Theatre Company, because this play tells a story that's rarely touched upon in American theatre. Yee not only tells the audience about the history of the genocide in 1970s Cambodia, but also shows us one of the difficulties many people who immigrated to the US, especially Cambodian Americans, are facing — how to tell their story of why they came to the US to the next generation. When approaching the genocidal regime, Lauren Yee let the audience follow both Duch and Chum, and she shows the perspective of every band member about Khmer Rouge: Pou and Rom didn't realize the regime was changing, and Leng chose to follow whatever side that was going to win the war.

Doing so, Yee gives the audience an explanation why some people fled away and why some people joined the Khmer Rouge. By creating or adapting these distinct characters, she demonstrates how hard it was to make choices when one option makes you the killer and the other leads to the end of life. The storytelling of this play adds a layer of humanity above the Khmer Rouge regime and statistics we learn in history class. It mentions the involvement of the US which indirectly helped the Khmer Rouge to come to power. Some of us might have learned that as a tip of the Vietnam War. However, the carpet bombing led by the US did causes to lose their home and accelerate the taking over by the Khmer Rouge.

Featuring songs of Dengue Fever, an LA based band that performs covers of songs by Cambodian artists who disappeared during the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodian Rock Band is also very cheerful and raucous. The live Rock n' Roll performance makes the audience want to sing and dance with them. By weaving the story together with Cambodian music, she introduces the audience to these artists who somehow made their music survive through the darkest days. At the same time she also shows us the power of art as the hope and light that keep us company in the longest days. With some dark humor and warm moments, this play makes the audience smile at the same time and pushes us to think and to cherish life now — what we might have been taking for granted.

I don't see any technical difficulties to be produced at THEA 1903 Theatre Company. Even though there are many scene changes, these can be done in a minimal set with the help of both the cast and crew members. It's worth mentioning that because of the number of songs that are performed on stage by the cast, in both Khmer and English, this play should be given the rehearsal time as a small musical. The only difficulty with this play would be the cast of six

Asian actors that should to master in different instruments. However, I don't think it's unachievable in the Pittsburgh community.

I think this play has an important story to tell now, because the immigration policy in the US is getting tougher. The United States, a nation made of immigrants, should be a more inclusive place. It's a nation of people who carry different histories and stories behind their backs. The story of Chum will make the audience wonder why their ancestors came to the US in the first place. The government is trying to close the door to people who come to this country to seek opportunities and protection. By producing this play now, our company can show the community our welcoming and positive attitude. This play is bright and terrifying at the same time. The characters in this play are victims of war, and they are also artists. The juxtaposition between a rock concert and an interrogation makes people wonder what we or generations before us paid to get the peace we have today. We can deliver our message and show our empathy by presenting this play.

The Cambodian community is rather small in Pittsburgh, but I see this as a reason why we should produce this play: we should listen to these underrepresented voices, and we tell their stories. It is not only Cambodian history; it is a tragedy of human beings, and we should know what mistake the US made that catalyzed it. Even though the part of history is tragic, the play is itself has a very hopeful tone and many cheerful songs that everyone can enjoy. I believe everybody can take away something from either the music or the storytelling if not both. I think this show would be very effective with lobby displays and talkbacks. By having an informative lobby display, we let the audience know the historical background about the Khmer Rouge regime and Cambodian music in the 1960s. It's an opportunity to answer the questions the audience might have in mind about this play. By holding a talkback, we can ask some questions

that let the audience connect the story with themselves. It's also a space for the audience to express themselves and to talk about what they think about the play. I hope this is an educating, thought-provoking and entertaining experience, and with an open discussion, the audience can make connections between their experience and story.

Thank you, and best wishes on season selections.

Sincerely,  
Xiao Han  
Dramaturg