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Program Essay

I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.

— Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

From Euripides' *Medea* to Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, to David Henry Hwang's *FOB*, the story of immigrants carries so many emotions, conflicts and hope. Lauren Yee, the playwright of *Cambodian Rock Band*, has said "to me, there is nothing more American than the story of immigrants." These stories are often closely tied up with identity, culture and family. For American audiences, each of these stories seems familiar, yet they are also so personal and distinct. *Cambodian Rock Band* is no exception. You can see all these themes in this play, but it may be a novel one to the American audiences.

Most stories about immigrants deal with the struggle and hope of moving to a new place. However, *Cambodian Rock Band* is a story about how a first generation immigrant discovers the reason why her father came to the United States. When most people were looking forward, Yee chose to talk about the past—the unpleasant past before we start a new life: a past that's rarely told by people of an older generation to people of the younger generation who may be taking their life for granted; a past that's concealed so their children don't have to live it with. The story Yee is telling is the key to the understanding and connection between two generations who grow up in different political and cultural contexts. Yee wrote *Cambodian Rock Band* from the

perspective of a curious, confused and righteous first generation Cambodian American, Neary, to unveil the story of her father who survived through the darkest history of Cambodia.

You may ask what drove these people to survive through the wars, trauma and political changes. In the story of *Cambodian Rock Band*, it is the power of art. Art, which may seem to be both the least necessity and a luxury in the times of war, became the hope and solace for artists who lived in the Khmer Rouge regime. Yee craftily juxtaposes violent political changes and raucous, psychedelic surf music in a cheerful way in *Cambodian Rock Band* to ask one question: what is the power of art?

Yee began her journey in 2011 at a concert by a band from Los Angeles called Dengue Fever, and at the concert she encountered Cambodian psychedelic surf rock from the 1960s-1970s. Dengue Fever performed covers of original, Cambodian rock, which until then had been lost in the ruins of the war. The original songs were written by artists such as Ros Serey Sothea who died during the years of political violence. This unique style of music became the first piece of the puzzle for composing *Cambodian Rock Band*.

Although many people are not aware, many historians believe that the intervention of the US military in Cambodia is one of the indirect reasons that the Khmer Rouge seized power. On March 18th of 1969, the United States Strategic Air Command (SAC) started a tactical bombing campaign in Cambodia as part of the Vietnam War. Then on April 12th of 1975, the United States evacuated its military force from Phnom Penh. Five days later, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and took over Cambodia. Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge regime wanted to build an ideal, self-sufficient agrarian society grounded in ultranationalism and collectivism. Because of the influence from Western culture, works of art were extensively destroyed, and their creators were mostly killed or disappeared with record. Among them, these musicians, who blended

Western Rock and Roll and soul music with Cambodian pop music, were targeted first.

However, music not only was the hope for the musicians during struggles but also stays resilient through ages. Forty years ago, it was the hope for these artists, and about twenty years later, Ethan Holtzman and Zac Holtzman, members of Dengue Fever, discovered songs made by these artists. Ironically, Dengue Fever, an American band, made these songs more well known in the Western hemisphere.

Armed with information and inspiration, Yee started to piece *Cambodian Rock Band* together. It was her way to hold a celebration for the survival of these songs. The exquisite arrangement of these songs in between scenes creates a strong contrast between the desperateness after the change of regime and the fervency of the music. The cheerful songs seem so surreal when the backdrop of society is made of the blood of artists, but nonetheless the music has a healing power. It brings prisoners and executioners together; it brings people who are on different political sides together; and it also brings these missing artists and you, the listeners for the story and the audience for “the best fucking unknown band of Cambodia”, together.

## Works Cited

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