

PHARE PONLEU SELPAK AND THE THEATRE DU SOLEIL

present

***THE TERRIBLE BUT UNFINISHED STORY OF NORODOM SIHANOUK,
KING OF CAMBODIA***

a Khmer Recreation and Adaptation of the play by H el ene Cixous
originally produced by Ariane Mnouchkine at the *Th eatre du Soleil*, Paris
(1985)

Co-directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu
Linguistic, Historic and Intercultural Direction: Ashley Thompson
Translation: Ang Choulean

Project Coordinators:
Khuon Det, Artistic Director, Phare Ponleu Selpak Circus and Theater
Charles-Henri Bradier, Co-Director of the Th eatre du Soleil
Elaine M eric, International Affairs Officer, Th eatre du Soleil

Originally written for the renowned French theatre company the *Th eatre du Soleil* by H el ene Cixous, one of the most celebrated contemporary French authors and public intellectuals, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk* is a modern history play dealing in a Shakespearean mode with a recent tragedy: Cambodia's descent into genocidal terror, and Sihanouk's doomed attempts to change the course of history, in the cold war proxy battle for Southeast Asia. Foregrounding international complicities in the build-up to the Khmer Rouge genocide, as epic struggles play out in the microcosm of a small 'non-aligned' country, the play is also a highly poetic work in which the historical-political situation of Cambodia becomes a metaphor for the world.

The Khmer-language staging of *Sihanouk* has been conceived against the backdrop of another historic intercultural staging of Cambodian history, the International Tribunal for Khmer Rouge crimes. The work lays the ground for profound analyses of urgent questions in national and international arenas: questions regarding national versus international responsibilities for genocide in the first instance. But also conceptions of memory, memorialization and the progression of history. In particular, it explores assumptions underlying the famous post-Holocaust Enlightenment motto 'Never Again', invoking the notion that memory-work can prevent the repetition of traumatic events.

The *Sihanouk* troupe is composed of 29 Cambodian actors and musicians from Phare Ponleu Selpak. Theatrical work is co-directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu,

representing the Théâtre du Soleil. Ashley Thompson directs linguistic, historic and other intercultural aspects of the production. PPS Artistic Director Khuon Det follows project evolution closely, accompanying each actor's personal development.

Georges Bigot worked at the Théâtre du Soleil from 1980-1992, playing His Majesty King Sihanouk in Ariane Mnouchkine's 1985 production. Delphine Cottu worked at the Théâtre du Soleil from 1997-2008. Taking inspiration from their respective experiences, Bigot and Cottu propose to the *Sihanouk* troupe a form of collaborative, democratic, artistic elaboration.

A first public presentation of work-in-progress will be held at 7 p.m. on August 25, 2010 at Phare Ponleu Selpak, Battambang.

Background

This project began as a dream or a thought experiment, a purely theoretical hypothesis formulated by Ashley Thompson after seeing the original production of the play and subsequently becoming involved in Khmer studies and the "rebuilding" of Cambodia in the 1990s. Staging *Sihanouk* in Cambodia had in fact always been Ariane Mnouchkine's own secret dream since first commissioning the play and developing the Parisian staging in 1985. But it was to take some twenty years for the conditions enabling the realisation of this collective dream to emerge.

In 2003, Thompson arranged for an initial draft translation of the play to be completed by Cambodian playwright Oum Suphanny. In 2007, Ashley Thompson and Eric Prenowitz, a specialist of Cixous' oeuvre, launched the project in earnest, proposing a collaborative exploratory workshop with members of the Théâtre du Soleil, Phare Ponleu Selpak and Kok Thlok, a new theatre troupe in Phnom Penh. Ariane Mnouchkine quickly channeled the Théâtre du Soleil's formidable energy, vision and expertise to establishing the long-term viability of the project.

Workshops and Rehearsals, held at Phare Ponleu Selpak

- December 2007: The first theatrical workshop, bringing together some fifty Khmer actors and musicians from Phare Ponleu Selpak and Kok Thlok, held for two weeks, under the direction of actors Georges Bigot and Maurice Durozier, who respectively played Sihanouk and his Prime Minister Penn Nouth, in the original 1985 production.
- January 2008: 3-week workshop directed by Ariane Mnouchkine with the assistance of six Soleil members, Duccio Bellugi, Shagaher Behesti, Everest Canto de Montserrat, Delphine Cottu, Maurice Durozier and Serge Nicolai.
- Spring 2008: Literacy training for select actors, organized by the Cambodian Ministry of Education in conjunction with PPS
- December 2008- January 2009: 3-week workshop directed by Hélène Cinque, who played XXX in the 1985 production, assisted by Caroline Panzera and Elisa Ponchelet.
- January 2009: 1-week history workshop for actors directed by Ashley Thompson, at the Bophana Audio-Visual Center, Phnom Penh.
- Spring 2009: Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu designated by Mnouchkine to direct the staging.
- August 2009: 4-week workshop directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu. Kok Thlok leaves the project.

- January 2010: 2-week workshop directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu.
- July-August 2010: Rehearsals directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu, assisted by Everest Canto de Montserrat, Caroline Panzera and Marie-Hélène Bouvet.

Ashley Thompson has directed linguistic, cultural and historical interpretation and adaptation of the play in collaboration with all project actors over the course of workshops and rehearsals.

Charles-Henri Bradier and Elaine Méric of the Théâtre du Soleil have provided overall project administration.

Khuon Det has coordinated PPS' contribution as host and project partner.

Eric Prenowitz has produced and assembled project documentation, organized archives in collaboration with PPS, and participated in adaptation work.

Hang Chan Sophea has provided archival research and secretarial assistance.

Loeum Lorn has made audio-visual recordings of rehearsals.

Thach Deth, founder of Kok Thlok, provided new working translations of the play and interpretation during workshops including Kok Thlok participation.

Siyonn Sophearith provided translation of Chapters 1-3 of William Shawcross' *Sideshow* for History workshops.

DC-CAM, Phnom Penh, provided further historical documentation for actors.

A Message from Hélène Cixous ([link to Cixous' promotion text](#))

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