

almost LOST

the “golden age” of
cambodian cinema
is not forgotten



by **Beth Daigle**

main photos by **Adrien Bisson**

From 1975 until early 1979, Cambodia was under the control of the Communist Party of Kampuchea and its followers, the Khmer Rouge. The regime was responsible for widespread famine, torture, massacres and, ultimately, the deaths of nearly 2 million Cambodians in what’s known as the Cambodian Genocide.

Not long before then, the Cambodian film industry of the 1960s and ‘70s was booming, and more than 400 films were made. Sadly, many filmmakers, directors, actors and actresses were killed during the scourge of the Khmer Rouge, and many theaters and films were destroyed. The actors and filmmakers who survived didn’t look back much to their time in the spotlight. Memories faded over the years and little would be recalled about Cambodia’s filmmaking past.

Survivors of this unbelievable brutality often find it too difficult to discuss. “Most Cambodians don’t like to talk about it,” says Nate Leonardo, a Lowell native and Cambodian film enthusiast who is the son of Cambodian immigrants. “I never fully understood the whole concept of what had happened until I became a teenager and started to do research on my own.”

Many young Cambodian-Americans today know little about the country’s bloody history. The teachings about that time are so limited that the horrific events have become something like tragic fairy tales, according to Leonardo.

“Even a lot of kids in Cambodia are just recently finding out about [the genocide] through the Internet,” Leonardo says. “Back in the ‘90s, if you were to tell them a story [about the genocide], they would say you were just fabricating it.”

Leonardo, 26, is one of two notable young men who have set out to uncover more of Cambodia’s past, in particular its film industry.

Leonardo, whose given name is Sovannet Hu, has been collecting entertainment artifacts from Cambodia’s golden age since he was a boy growing up in Lowell. His interest began at age 6, when he saw a movie trailer for a Cambodian film that dealt with Cambodian mythology. He was fascinated by the film’s artistry and started looking for a copy. Books, vinyl 45rpm records, film posters and one of the world’s largest collections of Cambodian films on VHS tape are, according to Leonardo, evidence of his personal passion.

Davy Chou, 30, is a Cambodian filmmaker living in France. His 2011 documentary, “Golden Slumbers,” details the rise and fall of the Cambodian film industry.

Chou’s career began when he learned about his grandfather’s filmmaking past and decided to follow in his footsteps.

Recovering Cambodian films is no easy task. Survivors of that industry are scattered around the world, and much of what had been created is thought to be lost.

Undeterred, Chou did some digging. His online research turned up a small community of people who were collecting music, film posters and some of the few surviving Cambodian films. Leonardo was one of those people. Of the 400



Opposite page: Nate Leonardo with some of the entertainment artifacts he has been collecting since he was a boy. This page: Scenes from the film “Golden Slumbers” (top to bottom): Young Cambodian collective remaking a scene from a lost film; surviving actress Dy Saveth; multiplied filmmaker Ly Bun Yim. Left: Cambodian filmmaker David Chou. Below: more of Leonardo’s extensive collection from Cambodia’s golden age.



known Cambodian films remaining from the '60s and '70s, Leonardo owns more than 30.

"I guess I was always a bit of a hoarder as a kid, so anything I got a hold of I always wanted to have a copy for my own," he says.

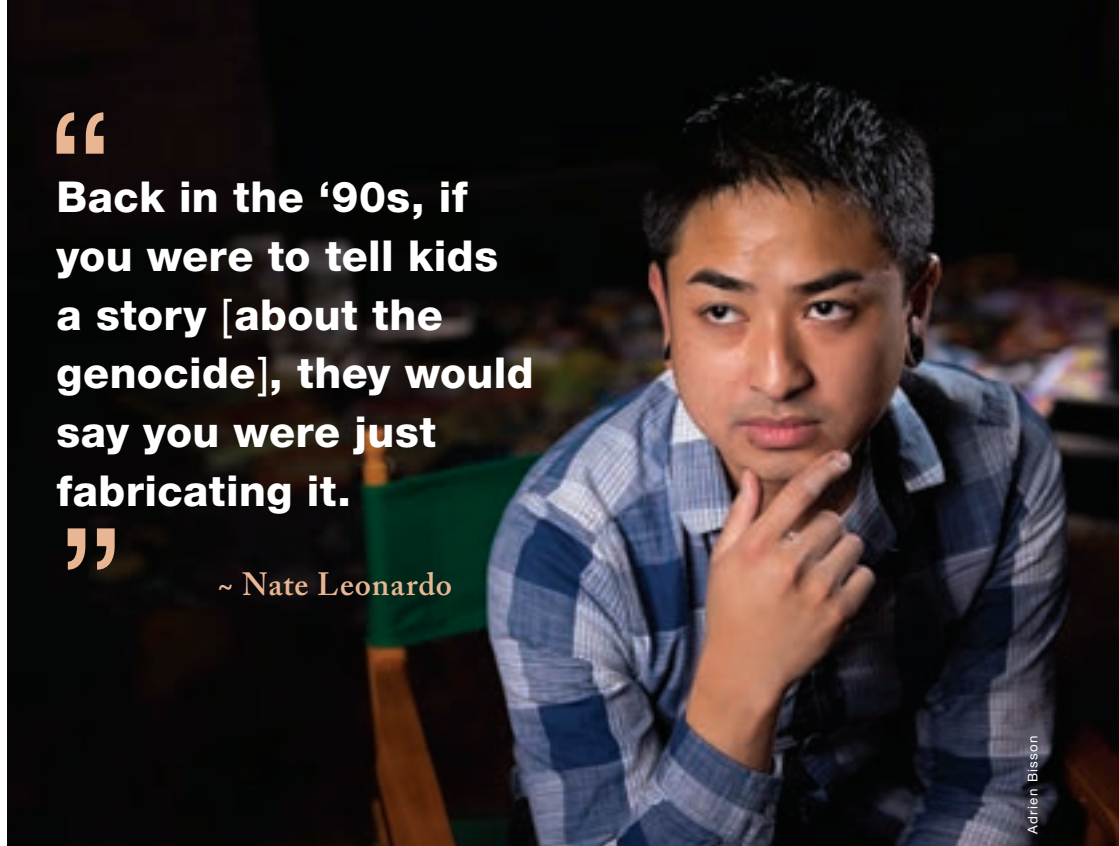
A man named Vathana Huy introduced Chou and Leonardo. Huy lives in France and grew up in Cambodia during its moviemaking heyday. He created a blog that includes a comprehensive filmography of Cambodian cinema.

The blog turned out to be a valuable tool for Leonardo and Chou, and would be the impetus behind them working together on "Golden Slumbers," which was screened at the 119 Gallery in Lowell in June 2012. Being in Lowell gave Chou an opportunity to show his film to the second largest Cambodian audience he had gathered to date.

"It was absolutely unique," Chou says.

“**Back in the '90s, if you were to tell kids a story [about the genocide], they would say you were just fabricating it.**”

~ Nate Leonardo



"There were so many Cambodian people, but especially so many young people, and that is what I was so excited with — it was a very good reaction."

Though "Golden Slumbers" has not

been screened extensively in Cambodia, the reaction from one group of students there was "amazing," according to Chou. "They were happy to learn about their history and proud to see a time when Cambodia was more glorious, producing films and having this kind of important culture to be produced and to share," he says.

Chou is continuing his filmmaking career with a feature production that focuses on what Cambodia is like today and the lifestyle of its young people.

Leonardo would like to see the recovery effort for lost Cambodian films catch on.

"I would love for people to be more aware of this stuff," he says. "The more the better, because it would spark more interest and motivate people to do their own research. Hopefully we can recover more materials that way and preserve what is left."

Leonardo feels his future is in Cambodia, where he could delve more deeply into his love of Cambodian music and films from the past, and bring their glory back to life.

"It is just what I like to do, because I love it," Leonardo says. "For me, it is just normal; it's me."



For more information visit GoldenSlumbersFilm.WordPress.com.

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