

FILM REVIEWS

Fear and Hope in Cambodia documents in video the 1992-93 period of the United Nations presence in Cambodia—the UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) period. The video film is a solid document of a significant moment in Cambodian history and a clear and effective narrative of events for those who know little about Cambodia: the 1991 Paris Agreements and the resulting U.N. mission, the withdrawal from the peace process of the Khmer Rouge, the return of refugees from the Thai border, the 1993 elections, and the establishment of a new government.

Isabelle Abric was an UNTAC filmmaker who directed production of news clips for Cambodian T.V. about the U.N. and the progress of the peace process. Near the end of the mission, she began putting together a documentary film about the

Fear and Hope in Cambodia

BY ISABELLE ABRIC
WRITTEN AND NARRATED
BY WILLIAM SHAWCROSS

PRODUCED BY THE UNITED NATIONS

FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS
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1993. 59 MINUTES. COLOR



Photo courtesy of First Run Icarus Films

period and the U.N.'s role. Probably most of the footage used in the film comes from U.N. news clips for Cambodian television. As in the news clips, Abric follows four or five Cambodians as they return from the border and participate in the events of the elections, weaving their stories

with general documentary footage about the U.N. and the events of the time. Abric brought in journalist/historian William Shawcross, who appears in the film as narrator, based on his own script.

While making the film, Abric once told me that Shawcross's role in the project allowed it to be more critical than a U.N.-produced video could normally be. It is true that the film has a more nuanced tone than one expects from a semi-governmental institution like the U.N. Shawcross's elder-statesman-like style helps, and the film is explicit about at least some of the U.N.'s failings, most importantly, its inability to keep the Khmer Rouge from withdrawing from the peace process.

There are limits to its critical stance. It makes an early reference to the idea that many failures of the mission grew out of the fact that the peace agreement was imposed by outside powers rather than originated by Cambodians themselves. This idea, however, is never developed. More typically, the film criticizes the U.N. for not reaching its goals because of inefficiency and poor planning. But it is beyond the scope of the film to question

the underlying assumptions of those goals or of the U.N.'s role more generally. Are there ironies about the U.N. mission which were not explored because this was a U.N. production? Probably. But the film is sufficiently honest and open that it does not preclude a teacher exploring issues more deeply in class discussion.

Two or three times, perhaps because of the inherent constraints of a 60-minute film, the video presents intriguing footage which is not sufficiently explicated: UNTAC investigators coming across burning documents, the negotiations over UNTAC's right to confiscate anti-aircraft weapons. Anyone who participated in the mission would know that one segment, where Special Representative Akashi Yasushi discusses the lack of training of UNTAC Civil Police, referred to more complex issues than the average viewer would guess from the narrative.

But these are minor points. The basic events of the period are laid out dramatically and well, and the striking imagery of Cambodians and U.N. personnel, presented with sympathy, humor, and idealism, will work well in the classroom. Much of the effectiveness of the film comes from the impact of its faces: the face of an older lady at her loom, Akashi's face as he is denied access to Khmer Rouge territory, a mother crying at the return of her son from the border, the smiles of people going to vote, the way a little girl bites her lips as she turns to look at the camera. ■

John Marston

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