Fear and Hope in Cambodia

BY ISABELLE ABRIC
WRITTEN AND NARRATED BY WILLIAM SHAWCROSS
PRODUCED BY THE UNITED NATIONS
FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS
153 WAVERLY PLACE
NEW YORK, NY 10014
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1993. 59 MINUTES. COLOR

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 TV 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 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. 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.

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