

Cambodia Documentary

Rithy Panh's award-winning documentary, endorsed by Human Rights Watch, will be painful for any compassionate human being to watch. The documentary brings together two surviving prisoners and a group of former Khmer Rouge cadre, interrogators, executioners, guards, record keepers, and the photographer who staffed the infamous S-21 prison where over 16,000 Cambodians were tortured, interrogated, and trucked off to be killed and cast into mass graves.

The scenes were filmed inside the still standing prison and at the Choeung Ek killing field. The Khmer language dialogue is crisply and accurately subtitled in English. Former prisoner Chum Mey collapses in tears in the opening scene in front of the prison, unable to speak, as painful a scene as I have ever seen on film.

Interrogators sit holding photos and confessions of their victims and discuss specific cases -- beatings, torture, unspeakable sexual violations of female prisoners. Former guards re-enact their prison routines on site, escorting incoming prisoners, monitoring the cells, taking prisoners to interrogation, taking them to the trucks headed to the killing field. Executioner and driver re-enact the execution and burial routine. The former prison staff re-enact political indoctrination and training meetings they attended in the prison, using genuine archival photos and documents preserved by the superb NGO, the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which is led by Cambodian-American director Mr Youk Chhang.

Surviving prisoner Vann Nath sits with the shamed former Khmer Rouge staff and try to fathom what was in their minds when they carried out the atrocities. "There are no more ideals, no more human conscience. We become dust in the wind." One of the final scenes is of dust blowing inside the upper floor of the prison during a thunderstorm.

It is in vogue this very week for some our leaders to publicly challenge Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, calling them "haters of America. "God knows the work of these two organizations is intended in part to insure that we never have to sit in shame in front of any human who suffered abuse at our hands.

Documenting human rights violations around the world helps to keep in our minds the stark differences between ourselves and "evil-doers." We must operate with the utmost transparency and

openness and demand the same from all of our momentary allies of convenience around the world.

No school should be without a copy of this film for its students. Every American interrogator, intelligence officer, and guard should watch and learn and pride himself in knowing that he is in no way like the interrogator in the film who says, "I was arrogant. I had power over the enemy. I saw him as an animal."