



CAMBODIAN ROCK BAND

by **Lauren Yee**

featuring songs by **Dengue Fever**

directed by **Chay Yew**

SignatureTheatre

STUDY GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Synopsis and Character Biographies.....	3	
A CLOSER LOOK		
Interview with Playwright Lauren Yee.....	4	
Interview with Director Chay Yew.....	6	
UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY		
Timeline of Cambodian History.....	8	
The Khmer Rouge’s Rise to Power.....	10	
Cambodian Surfer Rock Music.....	12	
BEHIND THE SCENES		
Interview with Music Supervisor & Arranger Matt MacNelly.....	14	
Interview with Actor Joe Ngo.....	16	
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES.....		18
ABOUT SIGNATURE THEATRE		19



The cast of *Cambodian Rock Band*. Photo by Joan Marcus

INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

Guitars tuned. Mic checked. Get ready to rock! This darkly funny, electric new play with music tells the story of a Khmer Rouge survivor returning to Cambodia for the first time in thirty years, as his daughter prepares to prosecute one of Cambodia's most infamous war criminals. Backed by a live band playing contemporary Dengue Fever hits and classic Cambodian oldies, this thrilling story toggles back and forth in time as father and daughter face the music of the past. Directed by Chay Yew, the New York premiere of this intimate rock epic about family secrets is set against a dark chapter of Cambodian history.

CHARACTERS



Chum
Joe Ngo

Chum survived the Cambodian genocide and started a new life in America. He prefers not to talk about Cambodia and has not been back since he escaped the Khmer Rouge regime. He's incredibly dedicated to his daughter, Neary, and unhappy that she's moved to Cambodia to work for an NGO investigating Khmer Rouge war crimes. Chum played in a Cambodian rock band as a teenager before he moved to America.



Neary
Courtney Reed

Neary is Chum's daughter, a Cambodian American woman in her mid-twenties. She is in Cambodia working for the International Center for Transitional Justice investigating Cambodian war crimes during the Khmer Rouge reign. She's just made a break in the case: there may be an eighth survivor from the S-21 prison.

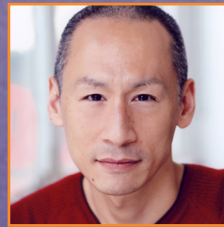
Sothea
Sothea is one of Chum's bandmates from the 1970s. She's the lead vocalist of their group, the Cyclos, and in a relationship with the group's bassist, Leng.



Ted
Moses Villarama

Ted works with Neary at the International Center for Transitional Justice. He is also her boyfriend, a fact which Neary has hidden from her family.

Leng
Leng is the bassist for the Cyclos. He and Chum are friends, and he's in a relationship with Sothea. Leng claims he's on the side of Cambodia and will join whichever political group he needs to in order to survive.



Duch
Francis Jue

Duch is a member of the Khmer Rouge regime and the director of the S-21 prison. He is based off of Kang Kek Iew, who changed his name to Duch during the Khmer Rouge regime. Prior to joining the Khmer Rouge, Duch was a high school math teacher. Under Comrade Duch, nearly all prisoners at S-21 were murdered. In *Cambodian Rock Band*, Duch is adamant about sharing his perspective regarding S-21 and the Khmer Rouge Regime.



Rom
Abraham Kim

Rom is the drummer of the Cyclos. He's goofy and has his head in the clouds. He has a vision about the Khmer Rouge takeover before it occurs.



Pou
Jane Lui

Pou is the keyboardist of the Cyclos. She has a quick wit and sharp, sarcastic sense of humor.



A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT LAUREN YEE



When did you know you wanted to be a playwright?

I grew up as someone who always knew they wanted to be a storyteller. I was writing stories from the time I could begin to read. It was around high school that I discovered theatre as the field that felt right for me. Most importantly, I think, it was about storytelling with other people. When you write a play, you get to be around a company of collaborators. You create the blueprint for a world and then you hand it over to other people who help build it and make it better.

Without giving anything away, what can you tell us about the play?

Cambodian Rock Band is an epic, intimate play with music about the most incredible music scene you've never heard of. Specifically, it's about the Cambodian Surf Rock scene in the 60s and 70s and how it was almost wiped out by the Khmer Rouge when the communists invaded and took over Cambodia. It's a father/daughter story about reconciling generations; it's also a story about what you would do to survive: what choices would you make? It's a play about morality, and it's about incredible music played by a live band.

I knew that I wanted to make a piece about this footnote in history, but for the longest time I didn't know how.

How were you introduced to Cambodian rock music?

Almost seven or eight years ago one of my friends took me to see her favorite band in San Diego, and it was Dengue Fever. They're an LA band that plays contemporary versions of Cambodian surf rock. As soon as I heard them play, I was immediately hooked. I didn't even know the history of the band or the music, but I just loved their sound. I immediately went down this rabbit hole of looking them up and in doing so, I learned all about the Cambodian surf rock scene of that era and basically what happened to those musicians, many of whom were killed or died during the Khmer Rouge era. That really shook me and made me think about why art is important, why it's revolutionary and why oppressive regimes are scared of it. Right around then, I knew that I wanted to make a piece about this footnote in history, but for the longest time I didn't know how.

When we think of Cambodia or the Khmer Rouge or even genocide in general, we think a lot about victims. To me, to tell this story successfully and do justice to these artists, it

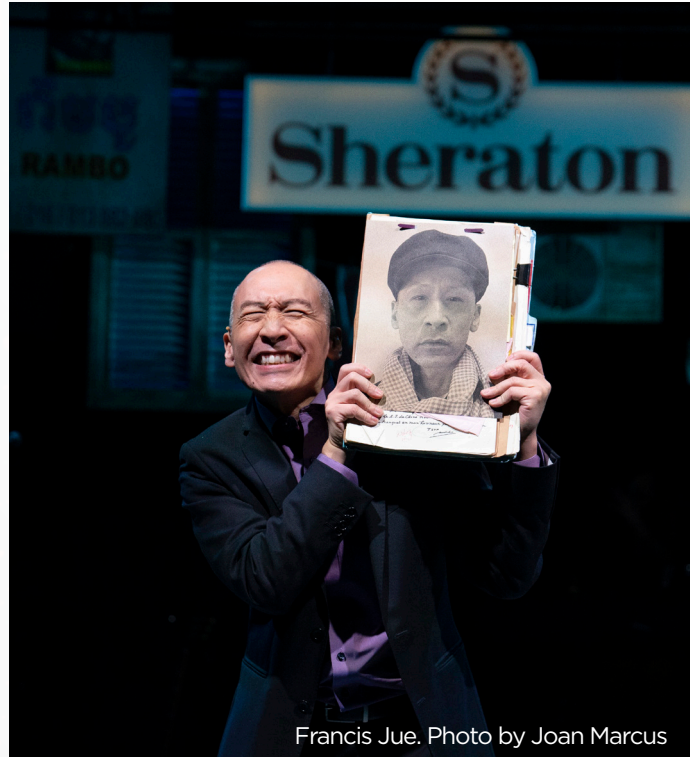


Courtney Reed and Moses Villarama.
Photo by Joan Marcus

has to be a story about survival and joy. It has to be something where you come out of it really deeply loving the music. Coincidentally, Dengue Fever is part of the show's soundtrack now. The band in the show plays about half Dengue Fever songs, half classic Cambodian oldies.

How did *Cambodian Rock Band* change as you continued to develop it?

I initially thought this was going to be a play about music, that we were going to talk about it and maybe would play a recorded track, but as I was going along, more and more I realized that if this is a play about music that was supposed to be erased, the most revolutionary thing you can do is take that music and play it live on stage and have those actors embody those musicians who died during the Khmer Rouge. As I went along, it just became more and more important that we hear that music and that we have that relationship with the music that we may not get otherwise.



Francis Jue. Photo by Joan Marcus



Joe Ngo and Courtney Reed. Photo by Joan Marcus

What's particularly exciting about sharing this play with New York audiences?

I'm really excited for *Cambodian Rock Band* to land in New York, and really feel like we're sharing this story with the widest audience possible. This history is so rich and incredible, and the music is so enjoyable that I want to share it with as many people as possible. It's not just history that lives in the Cambodian and Cambodian American community, but that this history should be known by everyone.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR CHAY YEOW



How did you get your start in theatre?

I got my first start as a playwright when I was serving in the military in Singapore. I wrote my first play, *As If He Hears*, for TheatreWorks there.

As If He Hears revolves around a heterosexual businessman who contracts HIV and the help he receives from a gay social worker when he discovers his status. During that time, plays had to be vetted by the government, and the censors banned my play for the sympathetic portrayal of the gay social worker. They said that my play was not in line with the government's "family values." I eventually revised the play so that it still made the points I had wanted to make. The later version slid by the censors. The key was to excise explicit references to the social worker's sexuality and build them in (non-written) stage directions. My experience with the state censors gave me my first playwriting lesson: how to write between the lines.

You're a director and a playwright. Does your work as a director inform your work as a playwright, and/or vice-versa? How do the two roles help you express yourself and your vision as an artist differently?

My experience as a playwright has often informed my work as director. I always see the play as my guide, and it's from the text which I build my production. As a playwright, you are primarily the generative artist. Most directors are interpreters.

When you first read *Cambodian Rock Band*, what was most exciting to you about the play? How did you start to think about the show moving from page to stage?

I remember being awed by Lauren's incredible theatrical deftness, brutal honesty, pure soul and wit upon reading *Cambodian Rock Band*.

She managed to effortlessly fuse history, politics, a rock concert and family drama into a potent work of art. Her play also breathes life to the timely issues in our divided nation: immigration, race, genocide and human rights abuses; the rights of refugees and emigres; the consequences of apathy when a country shifts under a brutal regime; and the destruction of freedom of expression in the midst of political transitions and upheavals.

In regards to the production, I knew the rock band had to be the emotional and physical heart of the play. By placing the band at the center of the set, I also wanted to evoke the time, regime and geographic fluidity that is in Lauren's play.

“

For me, there is no such thing as a career in the arts. It's a life in the arts.

”

You and Lauren have a very close collaboration. Can you give us a window into your conversations as the play developed? Were there particular moments in the play that you spent more time working through?

What playwrights and directors should most foremost possess in their creative relationship is trust. I'm truly glad that both Lauren and I have that. With trust as a foundation, we believe that the play always comes first. How are we best serving the play? What do we want the play to say? How can we best articulate each moment, each scene? What does Lauren intend for her characters and the world she has created? How can I breathe life into what she has written?

Our collaboration is often thoughtful and always playful. It is my job to ensure that

“Lauren’s powerful play celebrates the indomitable legacy of art and music; how artists capture our individual and national spirit and hopes; and the uncanny ability of art to inspire, to affirm our humanity, and to bring us together.”



Lauren gets the best production of the play she has written. Since music is a large part of the play, we spent much time on the songs. The music in *Cambodian Rock Band* does not necessarily propel the narrative, like a musical, and the music must not overwhelm the storytelling. Sometimes, a song is just a song in the play, and sometimes the song reinforces or gives a window to the emotions Lauren’s characters are undergoing at the moment. Sometimes the songs are played during transitions and the songs have to set up the tone of the next scene. Throughout this process, I often ask myself: How does music function in act one, in act two, the entire show? I need to see the overall shape of how the music works throughout the entire play. Aside from ensuring the music is setting up the emotional tone of scenes and characters, we have to be mindful of the variation of music styles so that the audiences’ ears are not hearing the same thing musically - for example, three ballads in a row or a set of hard rocking songs in one act. This helps the flow and rhythm of the play and storytelling as well.

This show is inspired by real events. What type of research did you do to prepare before rehearsals started?

I had been to Phnom Penh years before I was acquainted with *Cambodian Rock Band*. While there, I visited S-21 and the killing fields. My time and experience in Cambodia largely informed the research for the play. Prior to first rehearsals, I also did more research by reading articles and books and viewing documentaries to get a deeper understanding of the world of the play.

Is there a particular moment or theme in the play that resonates particularly strongly for you?

One of *Cambodian Rock Band*’s themes that resonates with me the most is the constancy, resilience and enduring power of art and artists. Lauren’s powerful play celebrates the indomitable legacy of art and music; how artists capture our individual and national spirit and hopes; and the uncanny ability of art to inspire, to affirm our humanity, and to bring us together.

You’ve directed this show throughout the country. What do you learn from directing the same play with different audiences, actors, and designers?

One of the luxuries of working on the same play in different cities is to get to know Lauren’s play very, very intimately. There are times when you hear a moment or a speech or a word differently than when you first heard it. I found each production gets deeper.

Do you have a favorite song in the show?

“Champa Battambang” remains my favorite song. I grew up in my native Singapore listening to this song, and it always reminded me of my childhood.

Do you have any advice for students interested in a career in the arts?

Just do it. I want to see your heart and soul, your thoughts and your feelings, your dreams and your fears in your art. I want to see how you see the world in the art you create. Be brave and be honest in your work. Don’t worry about what people think. Learn from the best. Be the best. For me, there is no such thing as a career in the arts. It’s a life in the arts.

TIMELINE OF CAMBODIAN HISTORY

Inspired by real people and real events, the story of *Cambodian Rock Band* has its roots in the complicated history of Cambodia. This timeline portrays only a fraction of the complex cultural and political forces that have shaped the country.

802 - The Angkor Empire is founded by King Jayavarman II.

1863 - Cambodia is declared a protectorate of France.

1941 - Prince Norodom Sihanouk becomes king. Cambodia is occupied by Japan during World War II.

1953 - Cambodia wins independence from France and becomes the Kingdom of Cambodia.

1957 - Sinn Sisamouth begins his music career.

1960s - King Norodom Sihanouk dubs his communist opponents, The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), the "Khmer Rouge."

1963 - Pol Pot becomes the leader of The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Pan Ron releases her first hit, "Pka Kabas."

1967 - Ros Serey Sothea releases her first hit, "Stung Khieu (Blue River)."

1969 - The United States, under President Nixon, begins a secret bombing campaign against North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. The final bombing concludes in 1973, with an estimated 100,000 Cambodian civilians killed.

1975 - The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, takes full control of Phnom Penh, overthrowing Head of State Lon Nol. The country is renamed Kampuchea. The Khmer Rouge coins the phrase "Year Zero." The total death toll during the next three years is estimated to be at least 1.7 million.

1975 - Ros Serey Sothea, Pan Ron, and Sinn Sisamouth, along with many other Khmer musicians and artists, disappear in the genocide.

1976 - Pol Pot becomes Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea.

1976-1979 - While the exact number is unknown, it is estimated that over 10,000 people are imprisoned in Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, during this time.

January 7, 1979 - Vietnamese troops capture Phnom Penh. Khmer Rouge leaders flee west.

1985 - Cambodia is plagued by guerrilla warfare. Hun Sen, a former leader in the Khmer Rouge, is elected Prime Minister. He remains in power today, as the world's longest-serving prime minister.

1997 - The Khmer Rouge put Pol Pot on trial and sentence him to life imprisonment.

April 15, 1998 - Pol Pot dies while under house arrest.

1999 - The Khmer Rouge is unofficially dissolved, with all of its leaders having defected, been arrested, or died.

September 6, 1999 - Ta Mok (Nguon Kang), the leader of the national army of Democratic Kampuchea, and Kaing Guek Eav (Duch), the head of the Khmer Rouge's security branch and prison system, are charged with genocide by the UN.

April 2005 - A UN tribunal to try Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide begins after years of debate about funding.

February 17, 2009 - The genocide trial of Duch officially begins.

July 2010 - Duch is found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to 35-years.

February 3, 2012 - Duch receives a life sentence in a court's appeal.

2018 - The US, under the policy of the Trump administration, sees an increase in deportations for Cambodian refugees who have legally resided in the US for decades. The refugees are being deported on the grounds that they have committed crimes in the US, many of which are decades old and for which the individuals have already faced legal consequences.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

HISTORICAL CONTEXT



Norodom Sihanouk

Norodom Sihanouk served as Cambodia's first ever prime minister. Sihanouk was born into Cambodia's royal family and served as the crowned king before abdicating his throne and running in a general election for prime minister. While initially popular, Sihanouk faced significant resistance during the 1960s at the height of the Vietnam War over his decision to remain neutral and cut ties with the US in 1965. He was overthrown in a military coup in 1970, only to return in 1975 during the Khmer Rouge reign and placed under house arrest. After the Khmer Rouge regime, Sihanouk continued a career in politics and was reinstated as Cambodia's king in 1993. Sihanouk was also a musician and wrote many Khmer and Western influenced compositions throughout his lifetime.

1965-1969

Cambodia's Civil War

Between 1965-1969, US troops fighting in the Vietnam War executed an extensive bombing campaign in Cambodia, targeting Vietnamese communist soldiers and killing approximately 100,000 people. In 1970, Prime Minister Sihanouk was overthrown by General Lon Nol in a military coup. Nol attempted to realign Cambodia with US and Southern Vietnamese forces. Meanwhile, a Cambodian communist group, the Khmer Rouge, was working in rural areas to activate Cambodians against Nol.



The Khmer Rouge

The Khmer Rouge, formally known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979. The Khmer Rouge built its support throughout the 1960s in rural Cambodia, positioning itself as a party for the people dedicated to radically transforming Cambodia's social order. The Khmer Rouge built their army through constant campaigning in villages and stormed Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, on April 17th, 1975. Within three days, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the entire city, starting a mass exodus that separated families, and declared the start of "Year Zero." Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge regime enforced food restrictions and forced labor. Extensive killing campaigns were carried out against supposed enemies of the state, namely those who were educated, wealthy, aligned with the previous government and/or the west, or a racial minority. The Cambodian genocide resulted in 1.5-2 million deaths, approximately 20% of Cambodia's population.

Pol Pot

Pol Pot was the leader of the Khmer Rouge. Born in Cambodia in 1925, Pot moved to Paris in his twenties, where he grew interested in the activities of the French Communist Party and the writings of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Upon returning to Cambodia, Pot became engaged in communist organizations, eventually joining forces with other Cambodian communists to form the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot led the new Khmer Rouge government as prime minister from 1976 until it was overthrown in 1979 by Vietnamese forces. During this time, he was known as "Brother Number One." Following the Khmer Rouge's regime, Pol Pot continued to work with the Khmer Rouge and organize guerilla campaigns. He died in 1998 while under house arrest.



Tuol Sleng Prison (S-21)

Tuol Sleng (S-21) was a high school that became a prison during the Khmer Rouge reign. It's estimated that over 10,000 people were held in S-21. While the site is often referred to as a prison or interrogation center, many are quick to point out that S-21 more accurately served as a torture facility and holding space prior to prisoner extermination. Detailed records of all prisoners were kept by prison guards, including photo documentation. Of the S-21 prisoners, only seven survived. Duch, a former schoolteacher, was the prison director at S-21. The building now serves as The Killing Fields Museum of Cambodia.



Duch

Prior to becoming the prison director of S-21, Duch taught math in a small Cambodian town. He joined the Khmer Rouge following the arrest of three of his students. Duch was also arrested by Prime Minister Sihanouk's army and held for two years. After his release, Duch rejoined with the Khmer Rouge. While Duch had requested to work in the Industrial Sector of government, he was instead assigned to oversee the S-21 prison. He was known for his meticulous notes and records. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Duch fled to Thailand and lived in anonymity for years as a teacher. He was discovered by an American reporter in 1999 and formally charged with crimes against humanity in 2007. He is currently serving a life sentence.



Aftermath

The Khmer Rouge was overthrown by Vietnamese forces in 1979, and the party fled into exile. Despite this defeat, various countries including China and the United States continued to recognize the Khmer Rouge, and the party held its seat in the UN General Assembly until the early 1990s. Many former Khmer Rouge remained in government positions, as well. In 2006, a United Nations-backed tribunal to prosecute war crimes under the Khmer Rouge was formed. In 2017, the trial concluded. Only three men were arrested: Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Duch. Cambodian schools first introduced history units about the Khmer Rouge regime in 2009, 30 years following the events.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

CAMBODIAN SURFER ROCK MUSIC

Music flourished in Cambodia under Prime Minister Norodom Sihanouk, who was a musician himself. While Western music had initially been introduced in Cambodia during its time as a French protectorate, the influx of US troops in the 1960s due to the Vietnam War brought new American radio and pop hits to Cambodian airwaves. Local musicians began covering American songs, combining traditional Khmer musical stylings and western trends. Many translated English lyrics into Khmer for a Cambodian audience. Musicians also wrote their own songs, heavily influenced by Western styling as well as Latin American music.

Many musicians aligned themselves with the Khmer Republic, the coup government established by General Nol that had overthrown Prime Minister Sihanouk. Their political affiliations were made public through the patriotic songs they recorded to support the Republic, which were broadcast over the Phnom Penh radio system.

As Cambodia's civil war intensified, curfews were placed on residents. Musicians were forced to play their sets during the day. The noise of bombings and gunfire could often be heard in the clubs during performances.

When the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh in 1975 and evacuated the city, many musicians were included in the forced exodus. Musicians were thought to be particularly threatening due to their ties to Western civilization and influence on culture. Many of Cambodia's leading musicians died during the Khmer Rouge regime, and little to no record has been left of them.





Cambodia's first rock band



Ran was one of the first female rock-and-roll singers in Cambodia. She recorded collaborations with Sinn Sisamouth. She was known for her forward-thinking perspectives on gender roles and her Western-influenced style.



Cambodia's most famous pop singer. While he got his start as a crooner, Sisamouth began introducing more rock sounds into his repertoire in the 1960s. Sisamouth is credited with writing over 1,000 songs.



Aularong was influenced by the late 1960s/early 1970s garage rock sounds coming from America and incorporated them into his music, including the song "Jeas Cyclo."



Sothea's work was a mix of original songs and adaptations of popular Western music in Khmer. She frequently collaborated with Sinn Sisamouth. Sothea was honored by Sihanouk with the royal title of, "Queen with the Golden Voice." The only surviving video footage of Sothea shows her parachuting out of a Khmer Republic paratrooper drill.



Drakkar often performed music inspired by Western rock groups like Led Zeppelin and Santana. They had a significant influence on Cambodian style, particularly through their long hairstyles and eclectic Western clothing. Three members of the band survived the Khmer Rouge reign.



Dengue Fever is an American and Cambodian rock band founded in the early 2000s that covers both Cambodian rock music and writes contemporary, psychedelic rock music in English and Khmer. More information about the band can be found on denguefevermusic.com.

BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH MUSIC SUPERVISOR & ARRANGER MATT MACNELLY



Photo by David Muller

What was the first moment you realized you were interested in theatre?

My high school would put on a variety show entirely created by students - directed, written, composed, choreographed, designed and acted. I

worked on the writing staff there, as well as performed in the show. I think that was the moment I knew I had both a passion and aptitude for being in the theatre.

You're the music supervisor and arranger for *Cambodian Rock Band*. Can you tell us a bit about your role?

My job is unique to this show and how it functions. *Cambodian Rock Band* has been called a "play with music," but in this case that's a big oversimplification. Every one of the actors has to play an instrument - from lead guitar to cowbell - and most of the time they're one unified rock band, complete with amps, mics, and monitors. I'm in charge of making sure they sound like a true rock band who's been playing together for years.

Cambodian Rock Band's music is a mix of Cambodian rock music from the 60s and 70s and contemporary American/Cambodian rock by the band Dengue Fever. When working on the arrangements, did you decide to make any special adjustments for the show?

Six of the songs are Dengue Fever originals, Two are Khmer songs they cover (and our arrangements borrow heavily from them), three are actual Cambodian songs from the time that we've arranged ourselves, and one is by a famous American artist. One of the big changes we made for our arrangements is that we have one less musician than Dengue - we don't have a horn player, so many of those lines have been given out to other instruments. Also, Dengue is able to jam and riff on songs - especially live - whereas in the theatre we need to operate within certain time and space constraints.

“My favorite part of the job has been being able to rock out with all these amazing musicians every day.”

As you mentioned, in *Cambodian Rock Band* it's the actors, not a separate group of musicians, who are playing all the show's music live on stage. How does this affect your music supervision and direction?

It's a lot about rehearsal time. In a traditional musical, you have rehearsal time with actors and separate time with musicians. Then when the show goes up, those musicians have a conductor and sheet music in front of them. In this show, Chay and I have to split time with the same artists, which is challenging. We usually front load the music in order to accomplish this - where we'll work musically for the first few days of rehearsal then move to staging.

Cambodian Rock Band has had productions throughout the country - and you've music supervised them all! What has it been like working so closely with Lauren, Chay and the casts as this show has come to life? How has your job shifted as the show has developed?

I've known and worked with Lauren for a decade, so it's been a gift to be with her as this show has gone on this amazing journey. Chay is also one of the best directors working right now, and I've learned so much being in his room. The big difference is the other production - directed by the amazing Marti Lyons - actually had Chum on Bass and Leng on lead guitar, the reverse of what we do in this show. So, I had the opportunity to completely shift arrangements, and start from the ground up with a new group of musicians. At this point, most of the band members are coming off an eight-month run at Oregon Shakespeare Festival and another month at La Jolla; they know the show forwards and backwards, so it's about getting newcomers up to their speed.



What's your favorite part of music supervision and arranging? What do you find most challenging?

My favorite part of the job has been being able to rock out with all these amazing musicians every day. I've watched all these actors learn and grow so much, and now I'm just quite genuinely a fan. The hardest part is tech. Enough said.

Playing with or supervising a band is all about collaboration and balancing sounds. Can you tell us about the role of collaboration in your process on *Cambodian Rock Band*, both with the creative team and the cast?

Collaboration is vital on this show. Every single production has been tailor made to the strengths of the performers. I'm not here to prescribe anything. I share my arrangement credit on the show with Jane Lui, who plays the keys and Pou. She came up with several of the arrangements herself - the one that stands out most to me are the beautiful harmonies in "Tooth and Nail" in Act Two - and she acts as the music captain on the show, who keeps everything together throughout the run. It's been vital to me to have someone who's such a talented piano player and composer in her own right, while I bring more of the guitar driven rock and roll side to the piece. Secondly, I have to shout out the amazing work of Misha Fiksel, our sound designer (who has also worked on every single production of the show). He and I work hand in hand to make sure the band can hear themselves onstage,

and that we can hear the best show possible. He manages to walk the tightrope between rock show and play, and I'm always in awe of his work.

In addition to your work in music you're also an actor. How has working both on stage and behind-the-scenes changed your approach or understanding of theatre?

I am an actor, thank you for asking. I will say being on the "other side of the table", as it's known, has been very enlightening to me as an actor. I've learned a lot about the audition process and tech especially - parts of the process that are often mysterious to those onstage. The biggest takeaway though is how hard everyone works to produce a play, especially designers and technicians.

Do you have a favorite *Dengue Fever* song?

Oh man, so many. "Mr. Orange" if I want to rock out, "Tokay" is great, especially live, and I think "Sister in the Radio" is the best bassline of any song ever.

Do you have any advice to students who are interested in a professional career in the arts?

Make friends with your collaborators. Your peers are going to be the ones on the journey with you, and the ones that will always be there for you. Find the people you trust and love and keep on creating with them.



The Cast of *Cambodian Rock Band*. Photo by Joan Marcus

BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR JOE NGO



Did you always know you wanted to be an actor? How did you get your start in theatre?

I started acting when I was in high school, but truthfully, it never occurred to me that being an actor would offer me any kind of life or career. To me, drama class was simply a place to express myself and have fun; especially when we would work on improv comedy. By the time I was a senior, I had begun to realize how I was able to make people laugh, cry and feel with my work. And through my high school teacher's encouragement during that time, the idea of being an actor stopped feeling like something people did just for fun. The following year I went to university as a declared theatre major with an emphasis in acting.

What initially drew you towards the role of Chum? How did you go about preparing for the part?

Lucky for me, I never had to audition for the role of Chum as I have been developing the play since its inception, so, it's not hard to see why I'm so attached to the part. As a source and frequent collaborator of Lauren Yee's, a lot of my family's stories were anecdotally woven into the character. And as a child of Khmer Rouge survivors, my initial structure for building Chum was based on my own dad. The next step involved doing an actor's work and crafting Chum's internal life through my own struggles, imagination, and commitment to the complexity of the character.

Cambodian Rock Band is unique in that it's a play with music, so you get to act, sing and play guitar! What's it like balancing all of these elements at once in your performance? Were you already a musician, or was playing with a band a new experience for you?

It's actually quite simple: lots and lots of practice! Before I even hit the stage, I'm lucky enough to have spent an enormous amount of time in a room with an incredible director and cast working away at all the little details

that make the show. I treat every song the way I do any scene, with a lot of care and focus, and an action will drive my life through the movements/beats.

For the music specifically: I've been playing guitar since I was about 14 years old, but only as a hobby. For a time, I believed that I would become a singer-songwriter but when it came down to it, I never had the heart to work towards it. With this play, I'm astonished that I get to work on something that has transformed me from an "acceptable" musician into a pretty good one (and really it's all thanks to Abe Kim and Jane Lui, who are the backbone of this band. Also, Dengue Fever who literally taught us how to play their songs).

We see your character, Chum, at both 51 in 2008 and in his late teens/early twenties in the 1970s. What's it like playing the same character at vastly different ages? Did you do any research or extra work outside of the rehearsal room to help you prepare?

I think that the crucial thing that I try to keep in mind when working on the role of Chum, especially as we see him in different parts of his life, is that at his core, he is the same character in all those life stages. The homework that I have to do as an actor is to create a history of information that the character carries in the scenes. As older Chum, he has already experienced all the things we see later in the play, and the way he moves through life should be informed by that. As younger Chum, my work is to remove all of that, and find the person who hasn't gone through that history yet. On an outside level, we need to see that he is the same person, and yet, how each moment of his young life adds up to the older Chum we see.

As research, I started my work by basing the character after my own father, who is both a survivor and almost exactly the same age as Chum (albeit in 2008) and making choices about how someone in his position would behave in those circumstances.

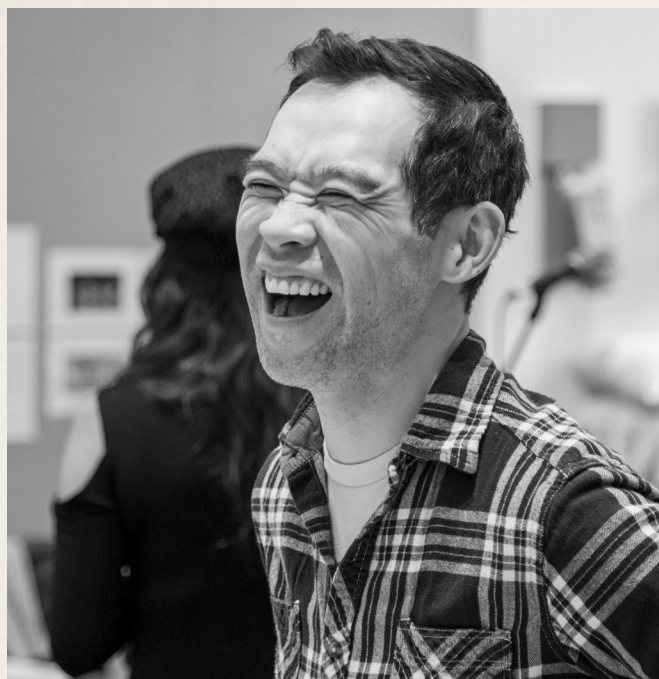
You've played Chum throughout the US in various productions of *Cambodian Rock Band*. What's it been like getting to develop a play and a character over multiple productions?

I see it as a gift to have been able to work on this show for this long and have done over 200 performances in various cities. What is most surprising is how much I continue to learn about this play every time I work on it, and how much deeper my character gets as a layer is added with each new production and rehearsal process.

Is there a specific theme you keep finding yourself drawn to in *Cambodian Rock Band*?

Whenever I reread or work on this piece, I can't help but be reminded of my parents, and how they were able to survive such a horrible period in their lives, and in relation, how the characters in this play must do what it takes in order to survive. I genuinely appreciate how Lauren has written a play that includes a lot of moral ambiguity, a lot of gray areas (outside the binary of good vs. evil) which showcases humanity in quite a truthful and beautiful way.

In that sense, I think the audience is forced to check their judgment, and perhaps even leave the theatre with more questions than they came in with.



Do you have a favorite moment in the show?

There are so many to choose from, but the first that comes to mind, is probably the first scene in 1975, in which Chum is a young man with his band, the Cyclos. The scene is so full of hope and joy, which is something that anyone can relate to. Furthermore, it reminds us that Cambodia was once not that different than any other country (namely the US), and that its youth at the time had all the aspirations that we see in any other depictions of the 70s.

I started my work by basing the character after my own father, who is both a survivor and almost exactly the same age as Chum (albeit in 2008) and making choices about how someone in his position would behave in those circumstances.

Do you have a favorite song in the show?

There are so many to choose from! My favorite song overall is "Champa Battambang," not because I think that I'm awesome when I get to sing it, but for the fact that it's one of my dad's favorite songs, and that it is a love letter to the city of Battambang, which is my parents' birthplace and hometown.

Do you have any advice for students who may be interested in pursuing a career in the arts?

I think that the most important thing is probably the most boring thing I could tell them, which is that in order to succeed at anything, one has to work hard. As an actor, you have to develop a sustainable craft and then find other people who work just as hard as you and work with them. And in order to endure the hard times and sacrifices that it will take in order to be a working actor, you have to work at simply being the best version of yourself.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Music of *Cambodian Rock Band*

[Cambodian Rocks](#)

[Dengue Fever](#)

Video Content

[S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine Documentary](#)

[Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll Documentary](#)

[TEDx Talk: Music Saved My Life, Arn Chorn-Pong](#)

Further Reading

[The Killing Fields Museum of Cambodia](#)

[The New York Times: 11 Years, \\$300 Million and 3 Convictions. Was the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Worth It?](#)

In *Cambodian Rock Band*, Neary works for the International Center for Transitional Justice, an NGO that works for justice in countries that have endured massive human rights abuses under repression and in conflict. More information about the Center and their work in Cambodia can be found on their website: <https://www.ictj.org/>



ABOUT SIGNATURE

Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014, Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host Signature's three distinct playwrights' residencies and

foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched at the Center to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



Free Student Matinees are made possible by lead sponsor Delta Air Lines. Delta Air Lines is the Official Airline of Signature Theatre.

Free Student Matinees are supported, in part, through the generosity of The SHS Foundation and The Sequoia Foundation.

NYC Cultural Affairs Free Student Matinees are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

A very special thank you to the New York City Department of Education.

**CONNECT
WITH US**

signaturetheatre.org



[@signaturetheatre](https://www.instagram.com/signaturetheatre)



[/signaturetheatrecompany](https://www.facebook.com/signaturetheatrecompany)