

PANDINLAO FILMS

presents

THE BETRAYAL

(NERAKHOON)

Directed by Ellen Kuras

Co-directed by Thavisouk Phrasavath

96 minutes – Color – English & Laos (w/subtitles)

High-res photos available at www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

FILM FESTIVALS

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL 2008

BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL 2008

HOT DOCS FILM FESTIVAL 2008

FULL FRAME FILM FESTIVAL 2008

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2008

SILVERDOCS FILM FESTIVAL 2008

New York Press Contact:

Susan Norget

Susan Norget Film Promotion

198 Sixth Ave., Ste. 1

New York, NY 10013

Tel: 212.431.0090

Fax: 212.680.3181

Email: susan@norget.com

SYNOPSIS

Short Synopsis

Filmed over the course of 23 years, THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON) is an astonishing tale of perseverance – one family’s struggle to survive their journey from war-torn Laos to the streets of New York. Eloquent yet devastating, renowned cinematographer Ellen Kuras’ directorial debut is a remarkable collaboration with co-director Thavisouk Phrasavath – a documentary that reveals the hidden, human face of war’s “collateral damage”.

Long Synopsis

Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath's debut film, THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON), tells the story of a family’s epic journey from war-torn Laos to the mean streets of New York. Filmed over the course of 23 years, THE BETRAYAL movingly chronicles the family’s struggle to reckon with that which was left behind while forging a new and difficult life in a foreign land. Thavisouk gives a first-hand account of his own boyhood survival of war, his later escape from persecution and arrest in Laos, his miraculous reunion with his family and their journey to America, and the second war they had to fight on the streets of New York City. Thavisouk’s mother also gives powerful testimony of her unflinching efforts to single-handedly raise and shepherd a family of ten amidst almost constant danger.

As its involvement in the Vietnam War deepened and conflict spilled into the surrounding territories, the United States clandestinely operated within Laotian borders. By 1973, 3 million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos in the fight to overcome the North Vietnamese; more than were used during WWI and WWII combined. A former commander in the Royal Army, Thavisouk’s father is recruited (alongside thousands of his countrymen) by the CIA, and works intelligence along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When the United States withdraws from Laos and the Communist Pathet Lao gains power, Thavi’s father is declared an enemy of the state and sent to a hard labor re-education camp – putting Thavi and his family in mortal danger. Repeatedly arrested because of his father’s US affiliation, 12-year-old Thavi makes a life-changing decision to leave his family and Laos behind, swimming across the Mekong River on two inflated plastic bags to a refugee camp in Thailand. Reunited with his mother and siblings two years later, the family flees to the United States in 1981, his father presumed gone forever.

Hoping to find safety and redemption in a country whose ideals had attracted their father to service, the family’s optimism evaporates after their American sponsors deposit them in single cramped room in a crowded tenement building – right next door to a volatile crack house in Brooklyn, New York. Disoriented by the western culture and desperate to survive, Thavisouk and his mother try to imprint their eastern cultural values onto the younger children before the family disintegrates completely. Robbed of his own childhood, Thavisouk struggles to reconcile his dual role as head of the household and older brother. He journeys through the rest of the film trying to reunite his lost family and regain a sense of peace and harmony in a world marked by borders and chaos.

In THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON), Kuras and Phrasavath have created a lyrical film that fluidly incorporates archival footage, cinema verite, interview material and visually poetic montages. The result is a story of what it means to be in exile, of the far-reaching consequences of war, and of the resilient bonds of family. Thavisouk’s unforgettable journey reminds us of the strength necessary to survive unthinkable conditions, and of the human spirit’s inspiring capacity to adapt, rebuild, and forgive.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS

ELLEN KURAS

THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON) chronicles one family's incredible journey from Laos to the U.S. and is also the inspiration for my own personal journey as a cinematographer, poet and filmmaker. For me, working on THE BETRAYAL has been an ongoing dialogue with Thavi about themes of life and death, of change in society and of philosophy. I've been intrigued by the loss of innocence in war, the loss of moral and ethical values in our society as adopted by newly landed immigrants, and how this loss mirrors our own in America. The question of identity and what happens to people without land, without a connection to land and home, and the fight for land is one that has captured my thoughts since university, when I studied the plight and the loss of self in Native Americans.

The film is a culmination of many ideas that I've returned to during the course of making many other films; it has inspired me and kept me humble as a person in the world.

The beauty of having filmed THE BETRAYAL over so many years is that these themes of life and death are intimately played out in this family drama in a way that only time can reveal.

I've been working on THE BETRAYAL longer, in fact, than I've been a cinematographer. This film actually inspired me to be a cinematographer. When I began to film back in 1984, I decided that I would try to shoot the film myself. I was looking for a way to tell the story with images, to allow the images to speak with as much weight as the words through visual metaphors. This started, in a way, what still informs my work today – a desire to make images that carry meaning in lieu of just being visual illustrations or representations.

At that time, I wanted to depart from the conventions of the documentary form. I didn't want to make a traditional documentary. I wanted to make a film that merged ideas from both documentary and dramatic film and from experimental film, like the ones I used watch at the Collective for Living Cinema in New York. From the beginning, I envisioned THE BETRAYAL as a combination of cinema vérité, re-photographed archival footage and other elements that could enable me to get closer to the idea of a very personal point of view of memory. I tried to imagine that the point of view of the film would be as if I was shooting from the perspective of a character, and then that character walks into their own point of view. The film could then be told in a very personal voice and, at the same time, be observant of that person in the world around.

This voice happened to become the voice of one Lao man whose story captured my interest and whose poetic sensibilities and ability to recount stories from his childhood kept me rapt with attention. I have been listening and still am listening over all of these years.

Following this family and being a part of their lives over such a span of time was only possible because of my collaboration and close friendship with Thavisouk (Thavi "Ta-vee") Phrasavath.

When I met Thavi in 1984, I was already filming another Lao family living in Rochester NY and wanted to learn how to speak the language. I was living in Manhattan and gave my number out to a woman who knew the small Lao community in Brooklyn. Thavi called back, asking, "Who are you? Why do you want to speak my language?"

Though incredibly busy running around as the informal head of his community, trying to help his people, he managed to find some time to visit my apartment twice a week to teach me how to speak Lao. (I still remember how to ask “please, where is the bathroom...?”)

Our connection was immediate; our bond to be lifelong. Our lessons turned into longer conversations about the Lao worldview and philosophy, about ancient sayings and what was currently happening to the Lao communities living in exile in Brooklyn and around the world.

THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON) is the culmination of these stories, and this time spent together, which is why I wanted to share the director's credit with Thavisouk, to recognize him as a co-filmmaker. I always wanted the film to be in a Lao voice and be told from their perspective, to hear the story – both the political story and the personal story – from their point of view.

This is how Thavi became the editor of the film. I had asked him years ago to put together a sequence – the family's escape – thinking that he would know best how to capture that experience. From that point on, he was always involved and taught himself all of the editing systems and programs (DVision, Avid, Final Cut Pro) to be part of telling his own story. I also felt it was important that the Lao community in the world – whose film tradition is just beginning – see that a Lao person has made a film. A film which happens to be about them.

I laugh when I'm asked whether I planned to take 23 years to make this film. “Are you kidding?!” I've been called by many the busiest person they know. The reasons are many but the main one is that I've shot many films over the years and this project has always been the project to return to—a passion project which has given me the opportunity to explore ideas both as story and as picture. There were periods when I was too busy to work on the film – one time around four years – but I always went back to the film and Thavi was always there, ready to get back into the ideas with me. At one time, when I was shooting SWOON, I couldn't get to a very important event that was happening connected to THE BETRAYAL. Thavi wasn't comfortable with an outside person shooting, so I gave him a Hi 8 camera and told him that he could shoot it—it was his story and how much more personal could it get?

THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON) has become a part of my life in a way that no other film has. I believe that the betrayal of America to Laos rippled down to more betrayals, ultimately to those that happened with a family. For Thavi, the war has never really ended. Personally, Thavi and his family have become my own and my family has become a part of his.

The ideas and themes in THE BETRAYAL still interest me, and I think they will inform my work and thought for years to come. One of the Lao prophecies, told 5,000 years ago, was one that we couldn't find a proper place for in the film, but as it rivets me still:

In the near future, a group from the evil empire
will go around the globe
protecting their territory and wealth.

Upon their will, there will be global war.

People will come to meet extreme hunger
and desperation beyond description.

In big and small countries
city streets will become war zones.

Killing, torture and de-humanization
will appear to the naked eyes on the
streets of civilization.

Greed will exceed morals.

People will stop listening and doing
godly things.

Some who call themselves the disciples
of god will show their loyalty to god
by doing ungodly acts.

They will pray and pray.

To suppress these groups, the leader
of the evil empire will show their power
by stretching their wings wide and
flying high beyond the sky.

So high that all the eyes on the earth can see.

THAVISOUK PHRASAVATH

On May 25, 1982, I came to the United States from Laos as a political refugee. My objective was to survive and stay alive in Brooklyn, NY – working to pay rent, buy food, and to ensure the safety of all of my family members. Becoming an artist never even entered my dreams. A first generation immigrant and political refugee from the un-popular Vietnam War, I was often questioned by Americans: Who are you? What are you doing here? Though I constantly tried to tell my story, it didn't matter – why should anyone care? Few even knew that Laos was a country, let alone where it exists on the world map. Not even JFK knew how to pronounce the name of my country.

During my early time in America, I did everything I could to camouflage myself, to blend in – by changing my body language, learning the local English expressions, adapting to the style of clothes. Sometimes, when I tried too hard, I ended up with a Michael Jackson hairdo and the personality of Bobby Brown, wearing MC Hammer pants, Duran Duran stocking gloves, and Gene Simmons boots, cruising up and down Flatbush Avenue. Even I began to ask myself: Who had I become? And what am I about to be?

It doesn't matter what or how I tried, the harder I threw myself against the arm of American society, the harder I bounced back against my own self. And there I found myself asking bigger questions regarding my ancestors' roots, my own identity and political history. What had happened to us? Who had started all of these things? I was not trying to fabricate evidence for judging anybody, but to have a better understanding and a better value of my own integrity. I tried and I tried. I came to realize that America is not the big melting pot that I believed it to be, but rather a gigantic wok of races, ethnicities and individuals – stir fry. Being of an imaginary people in a strange land, a man without country or dignity, it didn't take long for America to frustrate me. But out of this frustration, desperation and confusion, I began to search for my lost memories of a horrific childhood experience of war.

Then one fateful day I received a phone call from a total stranger. Who is this person who has an interest in learning how to speak my mother tongue and my history? That stranger is the person people know today as the DP/director/writer Ellen Kuras. Since then, my journey has taken a 180 degree turn. We became close friends, then collaborators, and our great journey together had begun. When Ellen asked me to be a subject of the film and collaborator, I was deeply honored. But I never imagined that this journey would take 23 years to complete. Yet it's been 23 years of spiritual and mental therapy, a searching of my soul.

Through the process of making THE BETRAYAL, I've been given the opportunity to become a filmmaker and find my true self. I have learned a great deal about how to speak my mind, how to never fear of speaking out, and how to be myself.

BIOGRAPHIES

ELLEN KURAS – Director / Co-Writer / Cinematographer

Director of Photography ELLEN KURAS ASC., an unprecedented three-time recipient of the Sundance Film Festival's Best Dramatic Cinematography Award, was first widely recognized for her black and white cinematography on SWOON, Tom Kalin's critically-successful independent feature film about the Leopold and Loeb murder case of the 1920's. Her work on the film earned Kuras the Best Dramatic Cinematography Award at Sundance in 1992 and a nomination for an IFP Independent Spirit Award. She and Kalin also made 30, a half-hour narrative film commissioned by Geoffrey Beene. Her next features, POSTCARDS FROM AMERICA, directed by Steve McClean and Ron Vawter's one-man show ROYCOHN/JACK SMITH opened at the 1994 New York Film Festival. Kuras's photography on the feature film ANGELA, directed by Rebecca Miller, won the Best Dramatic Cinematography Award at Sundance in 1995--the first and only time a Director of Photography has won this award two different times. That same year, Kuras was also nominated for an Emmy Award for work on CENTURY OF WOMEN.

Kuras began her career in 1987, shooting Ellen Bruno's SAMSARA, which received over 25 international awards, including the 1990 Sundance Jury Award. Her photography on the film also earned her the 1990 Eastman Kodak Best Cinematography Focus Award.

Among her other credits are UNZIPPED, the irreverent portrait of the fashion world's Issac Mirzrahi, I SHOT ANDY WARHOL, directed by Mary Harron and starring Lily Taylor, Director Spike Lee's NIGGERICANS, a segment of HBO's SUBWAY STORIES, and the HBO Special IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK, PART I, directed by Nancy Savoca and starring Demi Moore. She also photographed director Richard Wenk's JUST THE TICKET, starring Andy Garcia and Andie MacDowell.

In her work with Spike Lee, Kuras shot the Academy Award-nominated documentary FOUR LITTLE GIRLS, for which she was nominated for an Emmy. After shooting the MOD SQUAD with director Scott Silver, she went onto to rejoin Spike to shoot the ensemble drama, SUMMER OF SAM in 1998 and BAMBOOZLED in 1999. BAMBOOZLED, the social satire about black imagery in the media, is one of the first studio-released movies to be shot in mini-digital and blown up to film.

Kuras also shot Ted Demme's BLOW released in the spring 2001, a true story spanning 5 decades in the life of a major drug trafficker played by Johnny Depp. JIM BROWN ALL AMERICAN with Spike Lee soon followed and then she joined in another creative collaboration with Rebecca Miller to make PERSONAL VELOCITY, which won both Best Dramatic Cinematography and the Grand Jury Award at Sundance 2002. One of the very few women to shoot studio films, she shot ANALYZE THAT, starring Billy Crystal and Robert DeNiro and went on to shoot the visually impressive Michel Gondry film ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND.

Her latest films include THE BALLAD OF JACK AND ROSE, another Rebecca Miller film starring Daniel Day-Lewis, HEART OF GOLD, the Neil Young concert film, BERLIN with Lou Reed and BEKIND WIND, her second feature with Gondry. Her latest work in the music world has been as one of the star DP's working on Marty Scorsese's SHINE A LIGHT, the celebrated documentary of the Rolling Stones. She is the recipient of many professional awards including the KODAK CRYSTAL award, one of the rare below-the-line recipients of the MUSE (NYWIF) awards and was just given a Gotham Award in 2006 for leadership and work in cinematography. Commercial directors she's worked with include: Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, Noam Murro, Mark Pellington, and Sam Mendes. She is currently shooting THE FARLANDERS, directed by Sam Mendes. THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON), directed, shot and co-written by Kuras, is her directorial debut.

THAVISOUK PHRASAVATH – Co-Director / Co-Writer / Editor

Active within the Laotian American community in the U.S. and Canada, Thavisouk Phrasavath is a creative consultant for developing Lao TV and other media.

During his early years in Brooklyn, he served as the primary liaison/translator for Laotians living in New York City and surrounding areas. His background in community work includes assisting Gang Prevention for Youth and Family Crisis Intervention through the Church Avenue Merchants Block Association and working with the police department as a liaison and interpreter for the Lao community in dealing with domestic and gang-related issues. Formerly an Area Policy Board Member, Thavisouk has consulted for the NYC Board of Education.

Thavisouk's film work extends into writing, editing, directing and shooting. His projects as editor include Mira Sorvino's directorial debut MAKING FAMOUS, as well as SUMMER SCHOOL, CUBA LIBRE, AMERICANOS, STREAMING WITH THE PREZ, VIETNAM ON THE CUSP, SOUND PAINTING, and most recently, GOLDEN VENTURE, which was widely recognized and distributed. Thavi has also directed and edited music videos for independent artists, is a published poet, and has won awards for his painting and illustration work.

Thavisouk Phrasavath graduated with honors from Pratt Institute with a degree in Electrical Engineering.

THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON) is Thavi's first film as both subject and filmmaker.

FLORA FERNANDEZ-MARENGO – Producer

Flora Fernandez-Marengo has worked as a producer for the past twelve years, working internationally for many reputable directors.

Flora began her career in 1994 directing independent art documentaries in her native Argentina, before moving to London in 1996, initially to work on Alan Parker's film EVITA.

In 1997 she moved into the commercials industry, working as a producer for such leading companies as Academy, Gorgeous and Anonymous. Over the years she has produced campaigns for a number of directors, including Frank Budgen and Peter Thwaites, and has won several industry awards including Cannes Lions, BTAA, CRAFT awards, and D&AD.

In 2000 she produced a short film for established screenwriter-turned-director John Michael McDonagh before starting a film production company, Reprisal Films, in London through which she is producing a number of independent films.

Flora founded Pioneer Productions in Argentina in 2003, soon making it the largest production service company in the region.

Her latest project brings her back to her feature film origins, producing the documentary feature THE BETRYAL (NERAKHOON) with award-winning cinematographer Ellen Kuras whose directorial debut the film is.

Most recently Flora joined Los Angeles production company Red Rum Films as a partner.

CREDITS

THE BETRAYAL (NERAKHOON)

A film by
Ellen Kuras & Thavisouk Phrasavath

Directed by
Ellen Kuras

Co-Directed by
Thavisouk Phrasavath

Written by
Ellen Kuras
Thavisouk Phrasavath

Produced by
Ellen Kuras

Produced by
Flora Fernandez-Marengo

Executive Produced for American Documentary/POV by
Cara Mertes

Co-Produced by
Wilder W. Knight II
Gini Reticker
Chiemi Karasawa

Music Composed and Conducted by
Howard Shore

Cinematography by
Ellen Kuras, ASC

Edited by
Thavisouk Phrasavath

Voice of the Grandmother by
Boualay Vannalith

A Co-Production with American Documentary/POV

FEATURING

The Phrasavath Family
Orady Phrasavath
Santi Phrasavath
Thavisouk Phrasavath
Sethy Phrasavath
Phoumy Phrasavath
Khaysy Phrasavath
Savanhnaly Phrasavath
Bounnhang Phrasavath
Bounnhuen Phrasavath
Obma Phrasavath
Sinakone Phrasavath
Sinzay Phrasavath (1982-1998)
Mok Senmany
Tou Senchoummuenmany
Davan Senmany

Associate Producer
Post-Production Supervisor
Post-Production Consultant
Consulting Editor
Contributing Editors

Assistant Editors

Camera Assistants

Additional Camera (Rochester 1984)

Father's Arrival Video
Gaffer (Rochester 1984)
Edmundson
Script Supervisor (Rochester 1984)
Sound Recordists

Emma Tillinger
Riva Marker
Michael Jackman
Ellen Bruno
Kate Amend, ACE
Ellen Bruno
Angelo Corrao
Elizabeth Finlayson
Mitzi Goldman
Paula Heredia
Melody London
Kristin Lovejoy
Enat Sidi
Daisy Wright
Justine Wright
Katherine L. Flint
Rachel Goodlet
Russell Greene
Sharon Hughes
Harriet McKern
Corey Bayes
Rick Gioia
Alison Kelly
Jerry Risius
Tony Cucchiari
John Ramon
Thavisouk Phrasavath
Leighton

Chantal Bernheim
Ellen Bruno
Ruth Cullen
Stu Deutsch
Peter Hunt

Takagi
Sound Editor
Additional Sound Editor
Mouthon
Foley Editor, Recordist, and Artist
Re-Recording Mixer
Re-Recording Performed at
Technical Consultants

Dolby Sound Consultant

Music edited and mixed by

Music performed by

Associate Producer – Tallinn

Recorded by

Recorded at

Recorded and mixed at

Music Production Manager
Music Production Coordinator
Music Preparation
Consulting Music Editor

••

Lao Consultant
Lao Music Advisors

Lao Grammar Consultant
Publicist
Isotope Films Coordinator
Picture Post Production Services
by Deluxe | Postproduction | Toronto

On-Line Editor
Colorists

Judy Karp
Ellen Kuras
Etienne Sauret
JT

Dave Paterson
Benny

Rachel Chancey
Benny Mouthon
Postworks, NY
Stefan Brock
George Chung
Benny Mouthon
James Nichols

Jonathan Schultz

Sophie Shao, cellist

Eesti Filharmoonia Kammerkoor
ERSO Chamber Ensemble

Michael Pärt

Jonathan Schultz
Jesse Pynigar
Jim Bruening
Maido Maadik

Metodisti Kirik, Tallinn

HowE Building

Elizabeth Cotnoir
Alan Frey
Sue Sinclair
Jennifer Dunnington

Simon Dang "Zay"
Voradeth Dithavong
Phone Phoumythone
Khampha Sidavong Ph.D.
Susan Norget
Jaclyn Paris
Dan McLellan
Nick Iannelli
Tony Meerakker
Russ Robertson

Motassem Younes
Mila Patriki

Joe Gawler

••

SUPPORTERS

CAAM (Center for Asian American Media) formerly NAATA (National Asian American Telecommunications Association)

Flora Fernandez-Marengo

The Funding Exchange / Women's Project

Pamela A. Kuras

Harry Landsburg Memorial Grant

NEH – National Endowment for the Humanities Youth Grant

NYSCA – New York State Council Of The Arts

P.O.V./ American Documentary, Inc.

Soros Documentary Open Society Fund

Sundance Institute Documentary Fund

Mark Turtleaub

Pandinlao Films, LLC is the author and creator of this motion picture for the purpose of copyright and other laws in all countries throughout the world.

Released by The Cinema Guild